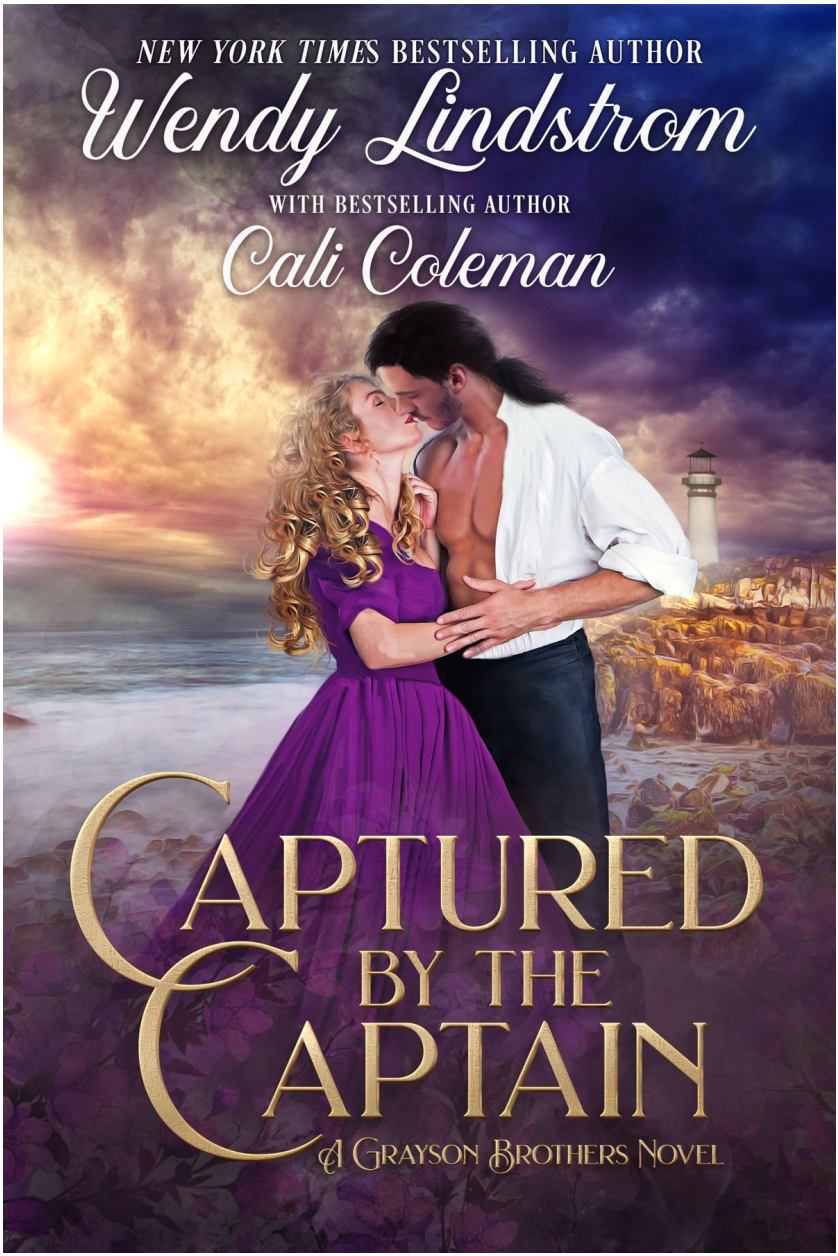

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
Wendy Lindstrom
WITH BESTSELLING AUTHOR
Cali Coleman
CAPTURED BY THE CAPTAIN
A Grayson Brothers Novel

Captured by the Captain

Wendy Lindstrom
Cali Coleman



CAPTURED BY THE CAPTAIN

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Lindstrom, Wendy
Coleman, Cali
Captured by the Captain/ by Wendy Lindstrom
Captured by the Captain/ by Cali Coleman
ISBN: 978-1-939263-62-9 (pbk.)
ISBN: 978-1-939263-61-2 (Kindle)
ISBN: 978-1-939263-61-2 (e-pub.)

1. Maine — History — 19th century — Fiction. 2. Victorian America — Maine. 3. Fiction. 4. Family Relationships — Fiction. 8. Love stories. 9. Historical Romance — Fiction.

EBook design by Rustic Studio Publishing
Cover design by Wicked Smart Designs

Published by Rustic Studio Publishing
www.wendylindstrom.com/contact

Contents

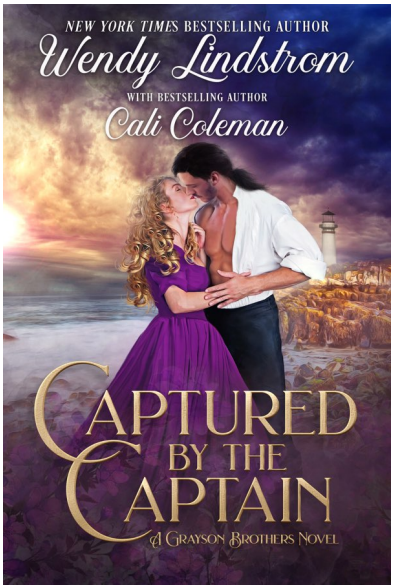
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WHEN I FALL IN LOVE
Chapter 1

A Note from Wendy Lindstrom
A Note from Cali Coleman
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Wait! Don't miss out…





Kidnapped, lied to, and betrayed, will her unexpected journey with the handsome captain be a cruel abduction—or a passionate adventure that will save her?

When Grace Covington, granddaughter to a powerful railroad industrialist, risks her life to help a friend, she believes no one will learn of her daring escapade. But her plans go awry when she is kidnapped by a bold, handsome captain who sails her straight into an emotional tidal wave.

Captain Leo Sullivan wants to prove he's not the lowly kidnapper Grace believes him to be, but he is honor bound to not tell her why, or where, he's taking her.

With every nautical mile they sail together, Grace finds her feelings warming toward her captor. She has never experienced desire until crossing paths with this man, this captain who has completely

swept her away, but she wonders if this journey between them will heal her broken heart… or drown her in a sea of regret.

Chapter One



Late April 1892

A violent gust snapped the mainsail overhead and mirrored Captain Leo Sullivan's black mood. His thoughts were as wild and tumultuous as the churning ocean he navigated. The pitch-dark night and howling wind suited him. He needed a good fight.

Locking his wet hands on the schooner's wheel, Leo stood at the helm and piloted Destiny straight into the storm. There was no outrunning fate or going back—his only course was the one he had a bad habit of following, straight forward and through the thick of it.

That had been his direction from the age of twelve…

When he'd made the worst mistake of his life.

When his family had been scattered like sea spray crashing against rocks.

When he'd known he would never escape the crushing guilt of what he'd done.

Icy rain pelted his face, the vicious bite a welcome distraction from the wrenching agony cramping his chest.

Destiny's bow dove deep into the watery trough, then pointed skyward as she climbed another massive wave. Leo signaled his first mate to trim the sails. The crew responded straightaway, every man on deck working hard to keep their girl afloat in the frigid Atlantic. They had families waiting for them to come home.

Captain Leo Sullivan had no one.

Another frigid gust snapped the sails and knocked him sideways as if telling him to stop feeling sorry for himself. Wallowing in self-pity when he had a job to do was a weakness he couldn't afford to indulge. Straightening his shoulders, he positioned himself behind the ship's wheel and regained control.

He did have a family—wherever they were.

The ship lurched hard and slammed him sideways again. Rigging clanged above as men shouted orders below. Leo maintained his grip on the ship's wheel, hanging on tight as he checked the compasses in the binnacle, refusing to let anything shake him from the course he'd set. He would make it safely to port. He would find his lost siblings.

He'd found one of them. It had taken him a decade, but he'd located his brother Ashe.

Their reunion had taken place at a train station in the fifteen minutes Ashe could spare before having to board a train to Penn Station. For Leo, that quarter hour had been bittersweet, awkward, heart-wrenching… and disappointing. There hadn't been time for them to share what their lives had been like since their family was torn apart, so they'd talked of ships and inspected each other as if trying to recognize their younger selves in their manly faces. They talked about their other siblings and speculated where they might be now.

Leo had mistakenly thought Ashe knew where their two brothers and sister were and that they would all meet in Charleston, South Carolina, but Ashe had only a last name of a couple who *might* have adopted them.

Leo had planned to head straight to Charleston to track down that lead on his own, but life and obligations had forced him down another course for the last several months. Now, finally, he was going to Charleston to search for his siblings.

Destiny, his two-masted schooner that had carried him from port to port through wild summer storms and frigid winter winds in his

search for his family, would carry him on yet another voyage. Come a squall or a hurricane that pummeled him to fish bait, he vowed to find his family.

But he had one stop to make first—and a promise to keep.

Indigo Isle, Off the coast of South Carolina

WITH THE *Destiny* at anchor behind him, Leo flexed his stiff shoulders and headed for the two-story, cypress-sided home situated on the southern end of Indigo Isle. The impressive structure was now home to his ailing friend Thomas Covington—a man who was dying.

A few oak trees with Spanish moss surrounded the house while beyond it lay a sand-strewn path that disappeared into the foliage and eventually led to a small creek.

With a sinking feeling, Leo knew the time had come to keep his promise to Thomas—and that this would be his last trip to the island. This would also be Thomas's last port of call. That truth clamped hard around Leo's heart.

As he entered the home, Thomas's nurse, Letta, a sweet, middle-aged woman with graying hair twisted into a tight chignon at the nape of her neck, motioned for him to head upstairs. He took the stairs two at a time to the second landing and then headed for the last chamber at the end of the long hall.

The smell of sickness hit him hard as he stepped inside the dimly-lit room. Shutters blocked out the heat of the afternoon sun, while a terrace door left ajar allowed a faint waft of ocean breeze and a slant of sunlight into the room.

Outside the window the sound of waves washing the shore mingled with the wet rattle of Thomas Covington's chest and the slight snores of the man's nine-year-old son, Willy, dozing in a chair pushed close to the large, four-poster bed.

Thomas lay frighteningly still in the middle of the bed, sunbaked sheets tucked loosely around his once-strong body. He had lost a great deal of weight in the months he'd been on the island. Leo immediately realized he should have come sooner, but he had been wildly busy in Crane Landing working at the shipyard and making short jaunts up the coast to transport merchandise to Nova Scotia.

But the sight of his dying friend tore a hole in his chest. The poor man had lost so much more than his health. And now Leo was here to honor the man's dying request.

As he neared the bed, Willy came awake.

The boy got to his feet and shoved his unruly hair off his forehead. "Captain Sullivan," he said, a note of excitement making his voice crack. "It's glad I am to see you."

With a riot of white-blond hair and eyes as green as the grass on the banks of Crane River back home in Maine, Willy was a ray of sunshine in the dark room.

"I'm glad to see you, too, Willy," Leo said, pulling the boy into a side-armed hug. "How is your father managing?"

"Not well, sir. He's been talking of his old home again. I wish I could take him back to Philadelphia for a visit. Can we go there on your ship when he gets better? It seems really important to him."

Leo gave the boy a nod and released him because he couldn't speak past the lump in his throat. Thomas wasn't going to get better. That Willy believed his father would recover was heartbreaking, and Leo dreaded the day Willy would have to face the truth. Thomas was at death's door with an unresolved issue that needed to be addressed before he drew his last breath. Leo could see straightaway that the situation had become urgent.

Palming Willy's mussed hair, Leo gazed down at him. The boy would be an orphan all too soon. "I'll sit with your father for a while. Why don't you head downstairs? A few of the crew will be here soon with something for you."

Willy's countenance lit up. "You brought a gift? For me?"

Leo grinned. "I did."

“Thank you, sir,” Willy said, already sprinting out the door. That the boy was eager to escape the sickroom, and that he entrusted his father’s care to Leo, was both sad and endearing.

Thomas’s eyes were open when Leo returned to the bedside. He gave the man’s bony shoulder a gentle squeeze. “You have raised a fine boy, Thomas.”

A relieved smile tilted Thomas’s cracked lips. “Thank you, Leo.”

Leo sat in the bedside chair. “I wish I could do more than bring medicine.”

Thomas dismissed Leo with a wave of one frail, trembling hand. “I spent the better part of my life wishing for the impossible,” he said, breathless and weary-eyed, “… and I lost a treasure because I spent my time wishing instead of doing. I’ll not hope or wish for another thing—but I will see that Willy is cared for and my children are united before I die.” He turned desolate eyes to Leo. “You will take Willy if… if things don’t work out with Grace?”

“Of course. There’s no need to remind me of my promise,” Leo said gently. “I’m honored by your trust.”

Thomas looked chagrined. “It wasn’t meant as a reminder, son. I just want you to be certain—”

“I’m certain, Thomas.”

“It won’t be easy for Willy when I’m gone…”

“I know.” It wouldn’t be easy for Leo either.

Leo’s boss and friend back in Crane Landing, Elias Crane, had introduced him to Thomas years earlier. Although Thomas was twenty years older than Leo, they’d formed a fast friendship. Perhaps they’d both recognized a deep ravine of grief in each other. Maybe they’d just bonded over a shared interest in shipbuilding and the business of transporting goods on vessels that were works of art. Whatever their connection, their friendship had deepened quickly, and Thomas had taught Leo everything he knew about sailing and commanding a ship and crew.

“I’ve brought a special concoction for you from Georgia Crane.” Leo held up a small cloth sack containing Georgia’s medicine. “She

said it will loosen your chest and help you breathe better."

"The lady knows her herbs. Whatever she's sent, I'll take it. God willing, it will give me strength and the time to hang on until I see Grace." Thomas angled a concerned look at Leo. "You will fetch her for me?"

"Of course," Leo said. He was here to bring medicine and legal documents to Thomas and to keep his promise to his good friend.

A promise Leo had no idea how to keep.

A promise that could cost him everything.

"You can't tell Grace the truth, Leo. She'll refuse to see me."

"I know. I'll think of something," Leo said, but he had no idea what that something might be.

"She won't forgive me. I know that," Thomas continued, his voice cracking. "I just don't want her to think she wasn't loved… that I didn't try—" His voice broke, and Leo gave his friend a moment to pull himself together. "She needs to know about Willy. But you can't tell her any of this, Leo. It needs to come from me."

"I agree." Leo would give everything he owned to be reunited with his family. He understood Thomas's desperation to make amends. "Your daughter doesn't even know you're alive, Thomas. Were I to confront her with the truth, she would likely think me daft… or unbelievably cruel."

A long, rattling sigh escaped Thomas. "I need to see her soon…"

Leo understood and felt a deep empathy for the man's sorrow.

A fit of hard coughing consumed Thomas, rattling his chest, shaking the bed, unnerving Leo. Time was running out.

"Fetch my daughter, Leo. Please be quick about it. I can't manage much longer."

Leo could see that for himself. "The *Destiny* is ready to sail as soon as I board."

"Then go. Please. Don't waste another moment."

"I'll return with your daughter as soon as possible," Leo promised. "You hold on, Thomas." But even as he said the words, he called himself a fool.

Thomas's daughter, Grace Covington, believed her father was dead. Leo couldn't tell her otherwise nor could he provide an explanation that would convince her to board his ship. How he would lure her away from a secure estate and a man like Joseph Fairview, a powerful railroad industrialist known to pull out all stops where his granddaughter was concerned, was a problem Leo couldn't solve—and one likely to land him in prison.

Chapter Two



Fairview Estate
Along the Schuylkill River, north of Philadelphia

Grace waved until her friend Sarah had joined the others in Devon Kettering's sled. An unseasonably late snow had begun in earnest earlier in the day, prompting the Kettering heir to bring his family's heirloom sled back out of storage. As Grace shut the ornate doors of the Fairview mansion, the falling snow swallowed sight of the departing sled. With her forehead touching the coolness of the carved oak panel, she waited until the sound of sleigh bells and laughter rang off into the distance. Only then did she lift her face and turn away.

So they'd all gone—her friends and Devon Kettering, too, her handsome neighbor and fiancé—after hours of sledding and then sharing stories and hot chocolate around the Kettering family hearth. Why Grace felt empty after a full day with her friends that should have left her dancing through the foyer, she couldn't say. She only knew that something important was missing in her life—albeit a good life of prosperity and affluence for which she was deeply grateful.

But something was missing.

Perhaps it was simply the absence of her parents that haunted her and left a void in her life, especially now that she was planning her wedding. They had been deceased for years, much of her life

actually, and she'd grown used to their absence but missed their love. Perhaps the emptiness she felt was just nerves over her upcoming nuptials. She was to marry Devon Kettering, an arrangement orchestrated by her grandfather and Devon's mother, to take place in under four months. Grace and Devon had been dear friends for years. Marrying him and joining two powerful families seemed a sensible thing to do.

But….

And that is where Grace faltered. She didn't know what that "but" meant. She only knew it was there like a niggling doubt, like a pesky gnat that wouldn't go away.

Pushing aside her concern, she took a moment to gather herself and settle her thoughts. The entire front hall was lit by a huge chandelier. The blown glass made tinkling sounds whenever the wind off the river swept into the house. Her mother had loved that sound. Grace did, too, and when her mother had been alive, they'd made a game of dancing across the prisms of colored light flitting across the foyer floor.

Now, as Grace stood in the cool front hall of Fairview, she felt a deep loneliness. The house was so empty—not of the many possessions her grandfather owned. But empty of… levity. The lightness that had once filled the sprawling estate had died with her mother—and the accident. What remained was her grandfather's protective love and stifling control. He called it love. And it was love.

But…

"Grace! Is that you, dear?"

The sound of her grandfather's commanding voice filled the front hall.

"Yes, Granddaddy." Handing her coat off to their butler who always seemed to know the best time to present himself, Grace headed to the library where she knew she would find her grandfather.

Joseph Fairview spent his afternoons in there, either at his desk

or near the fireplace with a book in one hand and a glass of brandy in the other. Today he was reading a book, presumably from his extensive collection obtained from London's best booksellers, and enjoying a drink, which meant he would be relaxed and approachable. Days spent at his desk tended to wind him tight like fishing line around a spool.

He greeted her with a smile on his lips and a lifetime of heartache and ambition in his eyes. "You are a vision of rosy cheeks and beauty, my dear. I take it you and your friends made use of the sleigh?"

"We did," Grace said, taking a seat opposite him. "We drove clear to the Old Anchor Inn before we turned back."

His white brows lowered in a deep scowl. "Why on earth would Devon take you to such a common establishment?"

"The inn is charming, and you know it."

"It's a nest for common folks."

His arrogance made her cringe. "We didn't go to the inn. It was simply the area where we turned back. You know how I love the stretch of road between here and the inn. The Alaskan cedar were utterly breathtaking." For Grace, admiring the forty to fifty-foot conifers draped with snow was the highlight of the trip. "The drive was lovely and quite safe, I assure you."

Instead of commenting further, he sipped his brandy. On the side leaf of the mahogany gaming table before him were two glasses flanking the decanter.

"Are you expecting company, Granddaddy?"

"Not for another hour, dear. Stay and tell me how your fittings are coming along while I best you at a game of chess."

Grace groaned, not because she didn't like chess but because dress fittings were a monthly ordeal that she had long ago grown weary of. Being fitted for a day dress or a party dress was one thing. But her grandfather had hired the Fox Dressmaking Company from New York to design her wedding dress. Trying to meet her grandfather's expectations of how the granddaughter of a railroad

magnate should look on her wedding day was rigorous—and everyone had an opposing opinion.

Grandfather wanted a dress of pure white silk to depict Grace's purity. Grace's future mother-in-law, Victoria Kettering, had lobbied for a dress of ivory satin with long sleeves, a high ruffled collar—because the weather could turn cool in August—and an obscenely long train. The dressmaker, a highly skilled and level-headed woman, suggested a mix of silk, satin, and faille in a shade of golden ivory adorned with pearls and embroidered with shimmering gold thread, all of which would produce a rich lustrous appearance worthy of Joseph Fairview's granddaughter and Victoria Kettering's sense of fashion. The dressmaker pressed on until she had finally gotten all to agree to sleeves that ended just below the elbow, a train that would fan out gracefully behind the dress, and a neckline that would appear modest while accentuating Grace's "slender neck and exquisite face."

Grace didn't care a whit about the dress. Her dresses were always beautiful, appropriate for the occasion, and the latest fashion. That was the benefit of being a wealthy man's granddaughter. She was extremely fortunate and had everything she could ever need.

But her grandfather could not give her the one thing she wanted most—her mother… and her father… and the joy she'd felt when they were alive.

"Prepare for battle, dear." Her grandfather, a distinguished looking man with his hawkish features and salted hair, gave her playful wink as he pulled out the chessboard and its carved ivory playing pieces. They set up the game they had begun days ago. "All right, imp," he said, leaning back in his chair. "Let's see if you can outwit me this time."

She had earned the pet name from him at an early age because of her impulsive nature. She'd always been too passionate, deeply emotional, and a bit reckless, but he'd never reprimanded or punished her for those traits even when her actions bordered on

defiance. In fact, he seemed proud of her ability to stand up for herself and to match wits with him.

Returning his challenge, she said, “I shall trounce you within the hour.”

His bark of laughter cut through the room. He folded his large, manicured hands and leaned back in his chair to study the board.

Within minutes, Grace had captured nearly all his pawns, both of his rooks, his queen, and had checked him twice.

With a determined gleam in his eye, her grandfather slid his bishop into position as if he’d been playing cat and mouse all along. “Check, my dear.”

Grace gave a mock display of surprise and disappointment. Then, ever so slowly, she slid her own bishop into place. “Checkmate.”

A low rumbling chuckle rolled through his broad chest. “Ah, you are too skilled, my dear Gracie,” he said, pride brimming in his eyes. “I abandon any thoughts of victory.”

“That’s what you get for teaching me so well.” Her wide smile brought warmth to his sad eyes.

He’d been her guardian since the tragic accident that had taken the life of her mother, her grandmother, and two dear family friends shortly after Grace’s tenth birthday. Now that she was older, she could understand the depth of loss her grandfather had felt over losing his wife and their daughter. He’d spent his time and money trying to wipe away the pain Grace suffered over losing her mother and grandmother and, tragically soon after that, the death of her father. He hadn’t succeeded, of course. Memories of her parents were fragmented and shadowed, but one ray of light shone through every memory—love. They had loved her, of that she was certain.

She was also certain she couldn’t have landed in more loving arms than her granddaddy’s. He’d been her lighthouse in the black night of her grief, guiding her back to shore, back to life. Unfortunately, he could be as solid and unyielding as a lighthouse, too, when it came to sheltering and protecting her, which was a

frequent point of contention between them. But her grandfather was a good man, and despite his reputation of being powerful and unyielding and sometimes too harsh, he had a kind side that few ever saw.

It wasn't just Grace whom he had taken into his home. Their neighbors, dear friends of her parents, had also been killed in the accident that had taken Grace's mother and grandmother. The man and his wife left behind a young boy named Saul who had miraculously survived the accident. The head injury Saul sustained during the accident had left the boy too trusting, too kind, and too vulnerable. And that boy, now a full grown man, stood outside the library door wringing his hands and shifting from one foot to another, a sure sign that he was distraught over something.

Before her grandfather noticed and questioned Saul, Grace excused herself and slipped into the hall. "What is it?" she asked, looking up into the sweet face of her tall and lanky honorary brother.

"They took your scope," he said, his expression both remorseful and sheepish.

Confused, Grace guided Saul away from the library. "My kaleidoscope?"

He nodded. "The men from the tavern said they are going to wager with it."

Grace felt her chest cramp as her heart began to hammer. "Saul, why did you take my kaleidoscope out of the house?"

A flash of shame filled his eyes, and his shoulders drooped. "I can see the pictures better outside."

The kaleidoscope contained cut glass, gems, and bits of ribbon that created ever-changing images that completely captivated Saul. Grace's father had given her the scope on his last visit, before he sailed away, before he died. It was the last gift she'd received from her father. And a pearl from her mother's necklace was in that scope. Grace had shared her treasured kaleidoscope with Saul because he adored it and because she loved him, but she had

cautioned him not to take it outside. Not ever. Saul was forgetful and easily distracted. She didn't want him losing her most treasured possession.

But he had done just that.

Despite her near panic, she didn't want her grandfather to discover what Saul had done. Her grandfather could surely secure the return of her kaleidoscope, but he would crush the men who took it and also scorch Saul's ears for not only losing the kaleidoscope but for being in that part of town. Grace couldn't do that to Saul. Even a mild reprimand would send him reeling for days.

Had she known about this during her sleigh ride with Devon and her friends, she could have had Devon confront the man responsible. Devon was the son of a powerful family, and he would have managed the return of her precious kaleidoscope.

"Tell me what happened," she said, walking Saul to the parlor where they could talk privately. "What did this man look like?"

"Mean. He looked mean."

"I'm sure he did. Was he as tall as you?"

Saul nodded.

"Was his hair the same color as yours?" she asked, gesturing to his dirty blond hair.

"No. It looked like horse dung."

Grace smiled. For the next several minutes, she queried Saul about the man who had stolen her treasure. He was tall and strong and mean with hair the color of horse dung and a nose like a hawk. Saul had also noticed that the man had an ugly scar on his hand and one finger was bent wrong. Good enough. Grace would find him and demand the return of her kaleidoscope.

After Saul headed back outside, his favorite place to be despite the unseasonably frigid temperature, Grace paced the parlor. No matter how she looked at the problem, if she involved her grandfather or her fiancé, Saul would be reprimanded, his delicate feelings injured.

Frustrated, she slapped her palm on the mantle. For Saul's sake, she must fix this herself. Somehow she would retrieve her kaleidoscope and resurrect the light in Saul's eyes. It was unfair that he had had to endure the cruelty of grown men and the theft of something he treasured as deeply as Grace did.

She could pay for the return of her scope, but the thought of buying back something that had been stolen from her grated. Still, she would do what she must. She might not be strong enough to physically wrest the kaleidoscope from the man's thieving hands, but she was smart enough to negotiate the return of her treasure. And that's exactly what she was going to do.

The Old Anchor Inn was a good ways downriver, but the Schuylkill was still a puzzle of floating ice with jagged edges that could easily destroy the small boat Grace used during the summer months. That meant she needed Saul to saddle two horses as soon as her grandfather was distracted with his guests. Hopefully, the snowfall would lessen, and she and Saul would have an easy time of it along the roadway.

It was an exciting—and admittedly dangerous—task she was about to undertake. She had to traverse a dark road at night and get inside the back room at the inn—a place, frequented by hard drinking, gambling men, she wasn't supposed to know about but likely where she'd find her man. The notorious room had been nicknamed the Lion's Den. It was rumored that few came out of it unscathed, meaning a man either lost his fortune or his good health in that smoke-filled room of vice. All she had to do was slip inside without being recognized, retrieve her kaleidoscope without a scene, and then return home without being accosted… or worse. What could go wrong?

Chapter Three



It was well past dusk of a bitterly cold and snowy night when Leo entered the Old Anchor Inn—a place he had visited often on Thomas's behest. Thomas had been warned not to show his face in Philadelphia. Myles Jackson, Thomas's longtime friend and former cook aboard the *American Lady*, now the owner of the inn, was a sentry of sorts for Thomas. For years he'd been gathering news about Thomas's daughter, Grace, and sharing it with Leo who in turn conveyed the information to Thomas.

Couched in a bulky seaman's coat that drove off the chill, Leo wore a low-crowned hat with his hair tied back to keep it from lashing his face in the blustery evening.

The common room, with thick beams hewn of Pennsylvania cherry wood and dining tables built by a craftsman, was crowded and noisy. Spirits were high and faces were animated as the patrons ate, drank, and enjoyed the company of their tablemates.

Leo scanned the large room until he spotted Myles bustling out of the kitchen and bearing a tray of tankards, followed by a serving girl who held a tray of bacon rolls. Holding their trays at shoulder height, the two of them moved with practiced agility through the throng. Once Myles deposited the tankards of ale at a nearby table, he headed toward the back room with a scowl on his face.

Leo intercepted his friend halfway across the floor.

"Well, look what the nor'easter blew in," Myles said, giving Leo a hard, back-slapping hug.

“Good to see you, Myles.” Leo tipped his hat to the young maid who headed back to the kitchen. Normally it would have been Myles’s wife serving alongside him. “How is Lisbeth?”

“She’s expecting our first babe. Big as a house and always hungry. She swears she’ll be delivering me a son any day now.”

Leo grinned, truly pleased with the news. “You’re a lucky man, Myles.”

“I am,” he agreed. “Have you come for news then?”

“Actually, I’ve come for more than that. Is there a way to gain access to Joseph Fairview’s estate without him knowing?”

Myles hooted as if Leo’s question was absurd. “Not unless you have extremely deep pockets to pay off his security men or are invited in by his granddaughter.”

Leo frowned. “No on both counts.”

“Then I suggest you don’t attempt it. But if you are foolish enough to try, you might be able to slip onto the property from the river. If you need a boat, I can help with that, but I’ll not be risking my business or my life by trespassing on Joseph Fairview’s land.”

“No need for either,” Leo said. He had his own boat, eased down from the sides of the *Destiny* that now weighed anchor off the winter-gripped shore. “Is there any news on Miss Covington?”

Over the past six years, Leo had come to Myles for information about Thomas’s daughter. He’d also confided in Myles that he was trying to track down his missing siblings, and though Myles hadn’t been able to provide any of the leads Leo sought, he always welcomed Leo and his crew with platters of food, tankards of ale, and an evening of robust laughter. If Myles knew anything about Grace Covington that would help Leo get onto the estate, he would share that information freely.

“You are not going to believe this,” Myles said, leaning nearer, “but Miss Covington just slipped into the back room. I can’t imagine why she would take such a foolish risk, but I aim to find out. That’s no place for a woman as you well know.”

Leo lifted one dark brow. “The lady is here?”

“Came in a few minutes ago, wearing an old cloak and thinking she wouldn’t be recognized. But I got a glimpse of that hair of hers and those blue eyes and knew her straight away. For her protection, I was heading in there to see what she’s about, but I’m afraid if I draw attention to the lass it will cause a ruckus that could get her hurt… or worse. The last thing I want is to provoke the ire of Joseph Fairview.”

“She came alone?”

Myles shook his head. “Saul is with her.”

Leo knew about Saul. He lived at Fairview and was deeply devoted to her.

“The two of them headed straight for the Lion’s Den, as if knowing full well what was going on in there,” Myles said.

Surprised, Leo poked his head into the room in question and spotted a heavily cloaked woman speaking with a man at a table near the back. Surrounded by smoke from the cigar clamped in his teeth, the man sat scowling up at her not seeming to appreciate her intrusion. From what Leo could see of Thomas’s daughter, she was being utterly foolish and reckless as well. Such facts did not bode well for his mission of whisking the young woman to the deathbed of the father she already believed dead.

He glanced at Myles, then nodded to his three crewmen who’d come with him to the inn. They followed Leo into the Lion’s Den, a smoke-filled place with men sitting around tables drinking ale and playing cards. Upon entering, Leo and his men fanned out and then made their way to the side of the room where Miss Covington and her big friend conversed with a brute who seemed to be enjoying the lady’s discomfort. With a slight nod, Leo motioned his men to close rank around the table but remain at a distance.

GRACE SHIFTED UNEASILY, growing uncomfortably warm. The room was heated by a large woodstove that had been stoked to roaring

flames. She yearned to shed her heavy woolen cloak with its fur-trimmed hood, but did not dare. To give away her identity would be a mistake. And to reveal any sign of wealth could spell disaster, which is why she'd removed her beautiful betrothal ring and left it tucked safely inside her jewelry box back at Fairview.

The gamesters seated around her were either fully drunk or well on their way to being drunk. She needed to leave at once, but the man in possession of her kaleidoscope was being obstinate, refusing her offer to buy back her treasure. Her hands fairly itched to snatch it off the table where it lay tucked securely in its velvet pouch, but it sat too close to the thief's big-knuckled hands. He would trap her the instant she reached for it.

The wretch had a small pile of winnings on the table in front of him, an amount Grace offered to double, then triple, but he refused. The obstinate beast had been referred to by his tablemates as Harwood. He fit Saul's description, and he was in possession of her precious kaleidoscope. The thieving rat!

Up close, the man was a fright. Everything about him was thick, from his waist to his hands, one with a bent finger, to his unruly brown hair and beard. Eyes nearly slits in his meaty face, it was difficult to know where his focus rested. But Grace felt violated by his lascivious gaze.

Had he possibly recognized her and known she could pay far more than she was offering? Or had his interest in her been roused because she was a woman trespassing in a man's domain?

She simply must get him to part with her kaleidoscope and get out of the inn before her foolish escapade landed both her and Saul in a heap of trouble.

Ducking her head to keep her face hidden in the shadow of her deep hood, she tried to be inconspicuous while she bartered desperately for the return of a vital piece of her heart.

Harwood, apparently growing tired of her demands, slammed his fist on the scarred tabletop. "Leave off, woman, and get yerself out of my sight before I make you sorry you ever set eyes on me."

She was already sorry, and suddenly shaken to her core. This man was a beast. And truly dangerous.

A latecomer who drifted toward the table coolly observed Harwood's outburst. The stranger had a commanding air about him, and though he took up a station near the table and leaned casually against the wall with one broad shoulder, Grace sensed that nothing about his presence here this night was relaxed or unplanned. Even Saul, standing just behind her, shifted uneasily as he noted the man.

The dark-haired stranger was tall and clean shaven, his skin bronzed, the crests of his cheeks windburned. His eyes, what Grace could see of them beneath the brim of his hat, were calculating and intense. He surveyed the group of gamesters and then shifted his gaze to her, letting it linger far too long.

Apprehension flickered inside of her. She couldn't be outed or distracted. She must convince Harwood to hand over her treasure and escape the inn as quickly as possible.

Determined to give the man no more notice, Grace wrenched her gaze from his and confronted Harwood. "You would do well, sir, to accept my generous offer and return what belongs to me."

"Or what?" Harwood said, his bloodshot eyes raking her from neck to knees.

Or what indeed. She couldn't very well threaten the man with her grandfather's wrath without tossing Saul into the middle of the same mess.

"What will it take then?" she asked, her voice hardened by frustration and mounting irritation. "Name your price, you scoundrel." She would pay the fiend whatever he asked, and soon be free and clear of this place—and free of the stranger looking on with a gaze sharp as steel.

But Harwood, who was driving Grace to the end of her patience, eased back in his chair. The lecherous look in his eyes told her quite clearly that it wasn't money he was interested in.

The lust emanating from his face sent her back a step. This was no longer a reasonable negotiation. It was a cat and mouse game—

and she was the mouse.

What an utter fool she'd been to believe she could manage this situation herself, especially with a despicable wretch like Harwood. Reason told her to leave immediately.

But her heart refused to budge. She was not leaving without her kaleidoscope. And she simply couldn't let Saul be punished for being vulnerable. He was the sweetest, gentlest soul who deserved only love and kindness.

Even if she sought her grandfather's assistance, Harwood and her treasure could be long gone by the time Joseph Fairview stepped in.

So Grace, impetuous from the day she was born and desperate to retrieve her most beloved treasure, leaned down and whispered something in Harwood's ear.

His hoot of laughter shook the rafters and drew every eye in the room.

Good. That's exactly what Grace had intended.

"Now that I have your attention, gentlemen," she said, addressing her audience. "I would like to request your assistance in retrieving something that was stolen from me." She pointed to Harwood. "By this man."

Confusion crossed the faces of a few of the men, but it was mostly ambivalence she saw on the other faces. Except on the face of the owner of the inn and the stranger who had moved in closer to her.

The handsome, dark-eyed stranger now stood just behind Harwood's right shoulder. One look in that man's amused gaze and she knew that he had detected her intent. She had turned the attention on Harwood so he couldn't accost her. Or so she hoped.

Just as that knowledge whipped through her brain, she noted the almost imperceptible nod of the stranger's head. Immediately, three other men dressed in similar seamen garb materialized from the crowd of patrons and moved closer to Harwood's table.

"The wench is a liar!" Harwood thundered.

A horrid silence descended as all eyes swung back to her.

Grace's blood ran cold. She waited for the dark-eyed stranger to echo Harwood's statement, to side with his fellow gambler… waited for his three cohorts to drag her from the room. Those men wouldn't know she was the granddaughter of a powerful man who could, and would, squash them like bugs should they so much as threaten her. To lay hands on her would mean death. Her reckless actions could cause an avalanche of destruction.

She had to get out at once.

The stranger seemed to be waiting to see what her next move would be. His associates, now situated at strategic points around the men at Harwood's table, did nothing.

All eyes were upon her. Every player in the room watched in stunned or stony silence to hear her reply to Harwood's accusation.

Grace gathered every ounce of her courage. Looking Harwood straight in the face, she leaned across the table, swiped up the man's heavy tankard and then brought it down atop one of his thieving hands.

His howl of pain shook the rafters. His chair crashed to the floor as he shot to his feet.

Grace grabbed the velvet pouch containing her kaleidoscope and told Saul to run. He caught her hand, and they bolted toward the door.

One of the gamesters made a half-hearted effort to stop her, but she was quicker. She clutched tight to Saul's hand, careening around tables of gamblers as they darted out of the Lion's Den into the main tavern and headed directly toward the front door.

"Stop her!" she heard Harwood roar.

From a distance, Grace heard a man yell, "Go," and wondered if it was the voice of the dark-eyed stranger issuing an order meant for his own men.

She glanced back over one shoulder just as Saul slammed his body against the main door and blasted it open. Harwood, a few of his thieving friends, and the stranger's cohorts were all speeding

toward her and Saul. Outside, she saw the handsome stranger slip out a side entrance and head toward her.

"They mustn't catch us, Saul," she gasped, trying to keep up with his long strides. Picking up her pace and clutching the sack in one hand, she realized belatedly she shouldn't have brought Saul with her. She'd just put his life in terrible danger. Too, most people in the area knew her grandfather was Saul's guardian. If they were caught, there would remain no doubt about her identity. If others learned the truth, her shattered reputation would be the least of her troubles.

Chapter Four



The snowfall was no longer hypnotic or dreamy, but a wild swirl that choked away the night and made Grace dizzy and disoriented.

"Dear heavens," she said, plunging forward. She wasn't certain if she were about to step into the river—or right off the ends of the earth. She knew the lay of the land, but in the whirl of white she lost all compass. "Saul?" she called, and reached out for him.

Thankfully, he was still beside her. Grace could hear his grunt of reassurance amid his labored breathing, and she could feel the wet coarseness of his woolen sleeve beneath her cold fingertips. She did not dare stop and pull on her gloves.

She and Saul had been running fast and furious for several minutes, certainly long enough to cover the distance to their mounts. Shouts and the muffled sound of pounding feet were gaining ground behind them. Harwood couldn't be far behind.

Grace guided them along the river's edge—the very way they had come—and where they would reach her grandfather's horses before long. To think that she'd left them tethered to a tree in this unexpected blizzard filled her with remorse. She and Saul had covered their mounts with two large blankets, thick as carpets, and had fed and watered them well before their journey downstream, so their mares were surely fine, even without the blankets, but she would have never left them standing outside in such weather. But who would have expected a blizzard the last day of April?

What had seemed a simple enough plan, a lark even—to go to

the inn, retrieve her kaleidoscope from that wretched Harwood, and then hurry back home—had, in fact, become a nightmare.

While stumbling through blinding snow, Grace's frantic mind flashed to the stranger at the tavern and she shivered beneath her cloak, imagining what he might be doing to track her down. It was obvious his men followed his every order, be it spoken or simply implied. The man radiated power and an irrefutable sense of command that even Harwood had seemed to acknowledge—if his sidelong glances at the man had been any indication.

Saul suddenly veered to the left, causing her to stumble. He urged her to follow him.

"That's not the way, Saul. You'll thread us right back to the inn. We need to keep hard right, then dead ahead will be the horses. I'm certain of it," she said.

"No, Gracie. The horses are that way," he said, pointing far left of her path.

When anxious or upset, Saul could get confused over the simplest of things. She knew the way to their mounts. She had burned it into her brain during their clandestine trek to the inn because she'd known they would have to beat a hasty retreat. Her presence at the inn invited trouble from curious men, and her greatest danger would be upon leaving. Or so she'd wrongly thought.

"Follow me, Gracie," Saul said, just as he was obscured in a blustery blast of white.

"This way is home, Saul. We must hurry!" She pulled her hood lower and bolted forward, wanting to put the danger and the miserable night behind her. Visions of a crackling fire in the hearth increased her pace. She clutched the sack more closely to her snow-covered cloak, and then hurried on, straight into the wall of whirling white.

Several paces into her mad dash, Grace realized Saul wasn't following. She ground to a halt and turned about. She squinted, listening for sounds of her brother. She could hear only the wind—

could see it, too, for it seemed animated suddenly, a creature come to life and painted white.

"Saul?" she called softly, afraid to cry out. She stood still for a moment, hoping beyond hope that he would come careening into view. He didn't. Had he gone in the direction he'd chosen, obviously thinking she would follow him, just as she had thought he would follow her?

"Saul, come here at once," she called, overset by nerves, fear, and the lingering memory of the stranger's penetrating eyes. "Please. We must go this way!"

There was no return answer or argument from Saul. No sight of him. Nothing but a world of snow and cold and danger.

Fearing she would be caught by Harwood and his men, she steamed ahead. Suddenly, the snow beneath her gave way. A startled scream escaped her as she plunged downward, over the side of a bank… and straight into the bitter cold wetness of the Schuylkill River.

LEO FOUND himself amid a world gone mad in winter's grip. No stars, no compass, only a wild swirl of driving snow that shifted with each frigid gust accompanied him. He listened closely to the sounds on the wind, using them to help navigate the night. The river was freezing at its banks, but he could still hear the rippling sound of flowing water to his right.

Pulling up his collar against the biting wind, he headed toward the water, assuming Grace and Saul would be setting a fast pace for Fairview. He knew the home was set near the river, and he deduced that no matter how the young lady had gotten to port—on horseback, foot, carriage, or via a boat—she would be fleeing for home near or alongside the river's path. He would keep near the river—and he would find her. Thomas Covington needed to see his daughter before he died. But given the girl's reckless adventure

stealing into the Lion's Den—a place frequented only by men, some hardworking, honorable men, and others the lowest miscreants like the man she'd pummeled with his own tankard—her life was in dire jeopardy as well.

The wind howled and moaned, but it was not the source of the scream. The sound came from behind him. Had he moved farther and faster than Grace had after fleeing the tavern? Knowing it was possible, especially in the blinding whiteout, and with her trudging through the snow in her long dress and bulky cloak, he whipped around and bolted several feet back to the river's edge.

For a moment, he saw nothing, but he heard the crack of frozen sticks and underbrush snapping as something tumbled down the embankment. Telltale tracks scraped dangerously down the steep side of the bank, past vines and tangles and icy rock, directly into the river where he watched in shock as someone took an unlucky plunge.

In one decisive motion he scuttled down the embankment, hoping he wouldn't follow the same path straight into the icy river.

Worry bit through him, the feel of it as raw as any flesh wound he'd ever known. His heart hammered hard in his chest for he could not spy the person in the water, could not discern their exact location. Below the surface or floating? Drowning or surviving?

If it was the girl, and judging by the scream he'd heard, it was Thomas's reckless daughter, then Leo simply couldn't fail to find her.

What an impetuous brat to do something so foolhardy as to tangle with a man like Harwood.

And now she could be drowning.

Or drowned.

Over a sack of coin. Foolish, irresponsible chit.

Slipping and sliding, Leo couldn't halt his downward flight. His left foot rammed into a stout tree root that caught the toe of his boot and sent him toppling forward.

He landed on his hands and knees in water that reached to his

elbows and was biting cold. He cursed, bolting upright, and whipping a wave of hair from his brow.

That's when he saw her, partially submerged and clinging desperately to a snow-covered rock at the river's edge. Her waterlogged cloak and skirts doubtless heavy as lead were dragging her down into frigid black water. Gasping, she clawed at the slippery rock, but was quickly losing her battle to remain anchored. Her hood had fallen back, exposing a beautiful, shadowed face stricken with fear, speckled with icy water, and plastered with flakes of wind-driven snow.

To Leo's utter disbelief, she still clutched the sack in one hand.

Launching forward, he reached for her. Miraculously enough, he caught her—or rather, her arm, the one holding the sack—and kept her from being sucked further into the river.

"I cannot h-hold on," she said, her voice and jaw quivering as she slipped further down the rock.

"Release the sack and grip my coat."

"N-no."

"Have some sense, woman! That coin will do you no good if the river wins this battle."

She lowered her forehead as if summoning her strength, or accepting her fate, but he heard her pitiful words as she sank lower in the water, "I c-can't let it go."

Navigating his way by inches up the length of her arm, he finally caught her at the elbow and pulled. She came without a fight, but the river refused to release its catch. Her skirts and heavy cloak weighted her down, making it nearly impossible to drag her onto the steep riverbank. "Release that sack and take hold of my hand," he ordered.

"N-no!"

Soaking himself to his waist, Leo hooked one arm firmly beneath her chest and hefted her high in the water. With his free hand he gripped a handful of her sodden wool cloak and pulled her to the edge of the bank. Finally close enough to circle his arms around her

torso, he hauled her onto the bank beside him.

Her sack clunked him alongside the head.

She released a great, long gasp, the sound of it punctuated by the chattering of her teeth. “T-thank you,” she whispered, eyes pressed shut, her breath coming in short, fast puffs against his cheek.

River water sloshed over their feet, fat droplets of it clinging to her mouth and her beautiful face. Snowflakes whipped about, sticking to their eyelashes, coating them, and turning instantly to ice. The burning ache in his hands and body warned him to move. He must get them to a safe, warm place immediately.

“It’s—s-so c-c-cold,” she said. “Will you please h-help me f-find my horse?” She gripped his hand, hers shaking violently. “My f-friend is lost. We must f-find him and our h-horses. Please.”

Leo knew that neither of them could afford to waste a minute searching for Saul. They were already in a precarious situation and would be fortunate to survive. “Since you are the one who fell in the river, I suspect your friend is well on his way home,” he said, trying to reassure her. His job was to get Grace to the *Destiny* at anchor in the harbor and tuck her in the warmth of his captain’s quarters where he longed to be. “Come on. I can get us safe and warm,” he said.

But he stumbled as he got to his feet. His arms and legs felt as if they were made of stone. He pulled her to her feet, the two of them teetering, wobbling as though they were drunk. In truth, they were growing dangerously sluggish from the cold. Despite her protest, he nudged her forward, his feet nearly numb, his hands stiff and aching from cold. “We must move.”

Her sodden clothing clung to her, heavy and wet, but he knew to remove any of her clothing would leave her more exposed and hasten her demise. Together they stumbled along the riverbank, Leo doing most of the work as Grace’s limbs responded clumsily. How she managed to hold onto the sack was a mystery to him, but she clung to it as if her life depended on it.

From a distance came a familiar call of a seagull and then the glow of torches through the snowfall. Leo pulled her into a crouch at the edge of the river. The call had come from his men, but it was a warning that others were near.

As the combined glare of torches punched through the snowfall, terror filled her face.

“Is m-my br-friend up there?”

Leo shook his head. “I can’t say, but for Saul’s sake, I hope he’s halfway to Fairview by now.”

She gaped at him with an expression of stunned disbelief. “You know his n-name… and about Fairview?”

“Yes,” he said through chattering teeth, knowing that now was not the time to tell her what he knew about her—or that she was being kidnapped.

Chapter Five



Relief flooded Leo at sight of his friend and first mate.

"Would've been here sooner if not for this blindin' snow," Fogg confessed quietly, letting Leo know that Harwood and his brutes were still nearby. "Sucks the very sense out of yer mind, it does."

A.C. Fogg, a big, brown-haired brute of a fellow, easily pulled Leo to his feet.

"Argh…" Leo was unable to hold back a painful groan.

"I saw one of Harwood's men take to the river and knew he'd be on yer tail, so Rigby, Micah, and I doubled back." Fogg explained how he had come upon them without being spotted by Harwood. "Rigby is with the boat just beyond that bend," he said, gesturing with his chin. "We can have the two of you aboard the *Destiny* soon."

Knowing their predicament was dangerous and urgent, Leo didn't waste a precious second seeking the lady's permission. He set aside his pride and allowed Fogg, whose arms and legs weren't numbed by the frigid Schuylkill water, to scoop Grace into his thick-muscled arms and help them navigate the slippery riverbank.

As he'd expected, Grace gasped and locked gazes with him. "Wh-what are you d-doing?"

"Taking you to safety."

"I d-don't know you! You must take me to Fa-Fairview."

"I apologize, but that's too far. My ship is closer. And the name's Sullivan, by the way. Captain Leo Sullivan."

Her gasp of shock at hearing he had a ship nearby at anchor and her feeble attempt to slip from Fogg's arms made Leo realize how much he liked her spirit.

"I cannot g-go to your ship!"

Her attempt to wiggle free was fruitless. The frigid river water had saturated her garments and sapped her strength. Even now, her head was listing like a rudderless ship.

"P-please. I n-need to find Saul…"

"I'm sure he knows his way home. You were the one, after all, who fell into the river. Saul is probably on his way back to Fairview by now." Leo didn't bother to continue reassuring her because her head was beginning to loll. She had to be in excruciating pain, but all he heard were her chattering teeth. His head and upper back were mostly dry, but his feet and hands were aching so fiercely he had to clench his teeth against the agony. He knew she was suffering, but she was growing eerily quiet. Then her body seemed to collapse in Fogg's arms, her head lolling, the sack she risked her life for tucked tight against her chest. If they didn't get her warm and dry soon to counter the effects of her icy bath, she would be in real danger.

Fogg was true to his word. Despite the snow and choppy water, the burly crew rowed Leo, who couldn't have handled an oar with his frozen hands to save his life, and Grace, whom they had tucked protectively between him and Micah, to the *Destiny*.

Leo squinted against the wind as he took in sight of the schooner. Her hemp cables were glazed with ice, her thick rails and rolled sails coated in snow. Luckily, he and his crewmen knew well how to handle a ship amid wintry blasts and wicked weather. Leo only hoped he was making the right choice in taking Grace from shore and far from any medical aid that could be found in the city.

The instant they arrived at the *Destiny*, Fogg carefully draped Grace, who mumbled incoherently, over his shoulder and climbed the pilot ladder to the deck. Micah went ahead of Leo with Rigby following behind to ensure that their captain made it to the deck, a

feat that left Leo gritting his teeth against the pain and exhaustion.

Still, before heading below, he gave the order for two men to return to the inn to inquire about Saul, and upon their return to the ship they were to break port immediately. Every man understood his duty and quickly moved into action. The storm that had iced the rigging and dumped nearly a half-foot of snow had lessened in just the time it had taken them to get onboard. He hoped the worst of the weather was now behind them.

Because he knew when Grace Covington roused from her cold-induced stupor, he would find himself in the midst of another major storm.

Leo followed Fogg as they maneuvered their way aft and portside, heading through the hatch to the captain's quarters. Once they had deposited Grace on the bunk—on Leo's bed—he sent his first mate topside to captain the ship. Rigby and Micah rushed to fetch supplies to treat both Leo and Grace.

As she struggled and failed to push herself into a sitting position, Leo found himself awed by her determination. Her movements were clumsy, her mumbled words chopped to fragments by her chattering jaw. Exhausted, she lay there letting her unfocused gaze roam his quarters.

His bunk and cedar wardrobe took up one end of the quarters with his desk and a private head occupying the other. A deep chill permeated the cabin. On any other evening he would have had the stove glowing in minutes, but tonight he knew he must hold off and tolerate the cold. Grace would need to be warmed slowly… as would he despite his aching desire for a blazing hearth and a blood-warming glass of whiskey.

He set to the matter of removing her wet clothing and shoes, not an easy task, especially with numb fingers. Her old woolen cloak was a sodden mass that Fogg and Micah had thankfully removed before depositing her on the bed. It was a wonder that she hadn't dropped like ballast to the bottom of the river.

With throbbing hands, Leo worked to undress Grace Covington,

a task he refused to pass off to his men. The least he could do was try to preserve Grace's modesty and privacy as best he could. Still, she fought him. Weakly. Ineffectually. That she was rallying was a good sign. He admired her spunk as she struggled and slapped at him, slurring her words like a drunk tavern wench. But this woman, with her golden hair and fiery spirit, was far beyond common. She was a gorgeous vixen whose thrashing was making his task far more difficult for his aching, clumsy hands.

He captured her wrist and gently tucked it against his chest. "I can't avert my eyes while undressing you, which I must do for your own well-being."

"You b-blackguard," she said, her body wracked with chills as she tried in vain to wrest free of his grip.

But in the privacy of his cabin, Leo won their battle. As he knew he would. As he knew he must.

Leaving her chemise and thin linen corset in place, he enfolded her stunning, shivering body in his thick woolen blanket and tucked another about her as she glared at him from bleary eyes. The sack of winnings she had clung to, so desperately, lay beside her on the bunk. He tossed it to the top of his desk in the far corner where it landed with a hard clunk. The sound surprised him. He'd expected to hear the sound of coins smacking the oak desktop, not something that sounded like a metal pipe.

Intrigued, but unwilling to breach her privacy to investigate, and knowing he had no time to spare for musing about the contents, he continued his ministrations to her. He was no stranger to frostbite. With feather-like strokes, he used a soft towel to pat her hands and feet dry. Despite her obvious annoyance, she allowed his ministrations. He kept his touch light. Regardless of her level of exposure, the warming of her extremities was going to be painful. He knew that because he was experiencing the same discomfort with every movement.

Rigby and Micah made several trips to Leo's cabin, bringing ointment, linens, and even hot cider.

Fortunately, Georgia Crane saw to it that all schooners and ships being captained by Crane employees were well stocked. Leo owned the *Destiny* and could make his own rules about what provisions she carried, but he valued Georgia's vast knowledge and intelligent advice. So he saw to it that his vessel was well stocked with all manner of medicinal supplies, including small rolls of cotton that had multiple uses on a sailing vessel.

Having a well-stocked medical locker didn't make one a doctor, however, and Leo's knowledge in that area was minimal. So he erred on the side of caution. He kept the cabin cool for another twenty minutes and lightly wrapped her hands and feet with the rolls of cotton Rigby had brought from the infirmary. He hoped the soft wrappings would slow the warming process in Grace's chilled body and also provide some comfort.

Hard, wracking shivers overtook him, and he knew he needed to tend to his own exposure. With fumbling hands, he began shedding his own wet clothing.

With an audible gasp, she turned away.

"Apologies, Gra—Miss Covington," he said, but continued disrobing. Thomas had spoken of his daughter so many times that Leo naturally thought of her as *Grace*, which made it difficult for him to remember to address her as Miss Covington.

After he pulled on dry clothing, he began warming his cold limbs while keeping a keen eye on her. She was again struggling to sit up, so he bent over and assisted her.

Rather than thanking him, she sat mute on his bed, leaning against the wall as she watched him with fury in her eyes.

What's done was done and there was no going back. She would have to accept that fact—and he would have to tolerate her hatred.

The angry silence was broken by Rigby's arrival. Within minutes the man had a fire roaring in the stove. It radiated welcoming heat and cast a warm glow against Grace's pale skin. Her lips were still blue, and she was shivering.

Leo longed to get his aching feet as close to the heat as possible,

but that would be a painful and unwise mistake.

As the cabin warmed from the small stove, he watched Grace drop further into a state of exhaustion until she could barely hold her head up. He sat on the edge of the bunk and scrubbed the length of her hair dry with the linen he'd used to dry her hands and feet. Keeping his aching hands busy distracted him from the mad urge to hold them over the stove.

His beautiful combatant protested his ministrations at every turn.

Her pathetic attempt at cursing made him chuckle despite his discomfort. He shook his head at her murmured threats and name-calling as he carefully brushed her hair. If his caretaking upset her this deeply, he could well imagine how she would react when she found herself on open water with him and his crew.

Her outrage would create one devil of a storm.

If there had been the slightest question that she was Thomas Covington's daughter, her warrior-like defiance erased any doubt in Leo's mind. He nearly laughed aloud when she thrust his hand away from her head. Wait until Thomas met this grown-up version of his impulsive and willful daughter.

Leo couldn't wait to see Grace back on her feet so he could make a proper introduction to the daring woman he'd first met at the inn.

But what little flame she possessed died quickly, leaving her slumped on his bunk. He left her there to rest, finally taking a minute to dry his mottled, aching feet. Spears of pain pierced his toes. He fought to contain his groans and curses, not wanting to disturb Grace, but it was impossible. For a moment, he almost wished he were delirious as well. As the circulation returned to his feet, he ground his teeth. The burning and throbbing was torture.

A low moan from his bunk warned that Grace was beginning to thaw out as well. His pain was nearly intolerable. He couldn't imagine what she must be feeling. They hadn't dared to give her anything for the pain until being assured that she hadn't injured herself during her tumble down the riverbank. But it might be time

to give her something, and perhaps take something himself as well.

Hobbling the short distance to the bed was agony. He collapsed onto the edge of the bunk, gently drew her away from the wall, and arranged her more comfortably on the mattress despite her feeble protest. He hoped her exhaustion would help her sleep through the throes of her body returning to its natural warmth.

Biting pain clamped down like a metal trap on his toes. His breath hissed between his teeth as he fought the urge to groan. Instead, he sat with her and stroked her hair, focusing on her recovery to take his mind off his own.

He hoped she would suffer no ill effects from her tumble into the river. When he'd undressed her, he hadn't been able to find any sign that she'd been injured by the fall. And when he'd found her, she just seemed angry and frantic. Silly chit. If he hadn't been so determined to catch her, she would have surely drowned. She couldn't have held onto that rock another minute. She was as good as gone and would have taken that dratted sack with her had he not heard her scream.

What trouble would send her on such a fool's mission?

Despite the poor decision the lady had made, she would surely demand an explanation for his actions when she woke up. But he had a few questions of his own he wanted answered.

For the moment, though, they were both consumed by a harsh recovery from overexposure. His pain subsided long before hers. His encouraging words and gentle touch seemed to be of little comfort in the throes of her pain. He wished he could spare her the galling, cramping ache that was torturing her. But he couldn't, and so he offered her a small draught of laudanum. She turned away, tried to fight him, but he knew it was kinder to force the laudanum on her than to allow her to suffer without it. And so he held her head and apologized as he dribbled the medication into her mouth.

She swallowed it and coughed and glared at him with bleary eyes.

A knock at the door drew him off the bunk. He hobbled across

the floor on tender feet and pulled the portal open.

It was Rigby, his knitted cap clutched tight in his rope-roughened hands, come to give an update of their progress. “Fogg says we should make good time tonight,” he said, his sandy-colored hair mussed from his seaman’s cap. “All is in order and you’re not to worry about a thing. He also reports that every hand onboard is asking how Thomas’s daughter fares.”

Leo wasn’t surprised. The crew of the *Destiny* was a close-knit group. Thomas Covington had been a favored and much-respected captain for many years. Leo had learned nearly everything he knew about sailing under Thomas’s brilliant instruction. Thomas’s former crew, many of whom now served on *Destiny*, would protect Thomas’s beloved daughter with their life, no request necessary.

“You can tell them that Miss Covington is doing well, considering all she’s been through,” Leo said, glancing toward his bunk where Grace was lying quietly, eyes closed.

Rigby visibly relaxed. “That is good news, Cap’n. Can I get you anything more?” he asked, stealing looks at the bed.

Rigby was obviously intrigued by the lady. So was Leo.

“Some willow bark and valerian tea would be good and perhaps some of that nasty balm you concocted for my shoulder,” Leo replied.

“Aye, sir.” With a nod, Rigby hurried off.

Within minutes he was back, steaming cup in one hand, and in his other hand a small crock of ointment made from laurel leaves stewed in lard.

Leo relieved his second mate of his delivery, closed the door, and returned to Grace’s side.

He sipped the tea and set it aside. Peeling back the blankets, he freed one of her feet, unwrapped it, and slathered it with the ointment. With slow, gentle strokes he did his best to soothe her mottled skin without applying pressure. She had delicate, pretty feet and slender ankles, an intimate detail about her that he had never expected to know.

But now he knew…

She was a beauty for certain. And a willful lady with a mind of her own that he found intriguing. He wouldn't deny his attraction. But she was Thomas's daughter. Leo's allegiance was first and foremost to Thomas, and he couldn't commit himself to anything other than finding his family. That had to come before everything. Even if his search ended with his last breath. Finding his family was first.

The lady wasn't here of her own volition, and her outrage would surely put a halt to any desire on his part. That alone would help keep his focus on track.

With that firmly in mind, he replaced the cotton around her cold feet and then tucked the blanket about them. The trek into the river must have addled his brain along with freezing his hands and feet. No matter what his obligations entailed, whether it be work or honoring the requests of friends, Leo hadn't allowed himself to be distracted by anything that would prevent him from finding his siblings.

But this reckless lady lying in his bed was not only distracting him she was driving his thinking off course like the frigid wind snapping and directing the sails on deck.

Unsettled by that realization, he took up his tea, hoping it would soothe his aching body and set his mind straight. The pitch of the ship felt good after being on land. The sea was in his blood, which had surprised him. Although he didn't hail from a line of master shipwrights and sailors, he felt the Crane family's seafaring and shipbuilding history as if it were his own.

While working at Crane Shipbuilding, Leo had purchased an old two-masted schooner in need of repair and named her *Destiny*. With an investment from his friend Adam Grayson, and from Dawson Crane, one of the owners of Crane Shipbuilding and brother-in-law to Georgia Crane, Leo was able to make the needed repairs. He left the finer details of outfitting his schooner to Georgia Crane. From the utensils used in the galley to the bedding of each bunk and

hammock to the supply of books and musical instruments onboard, Georgia made certain the crew enjoyed quality and comfort during their voyages. She also stocked the medicine chest with salves, powders, and syrups from the apothecary shop in Crane Landing, and made certain the galley was stocked with foods that would provide hearty meals for the hardworking crew.

Destiny wasn't just a schooner. She was a work of art inside and out.

Leo wondered if that would matter to Grace. Would she see herself as a cherished passenger? Or as a woman abducted and carried aboard against her will?

He would know soon enough.

For several long moments, he watched the play of light over her features. Had she sailed since the accident that had killed her mother? If not, would she find the experience to her liking? Or would she be terrified? The answer mattered to him. The last thing he wanted was to cause her distress. He didn't want her to be afraid. He didn't want her to hate him.

But she would.

If not now, then when she set her feet on Indigo Isle and learned the truth about why she'd been abducted.

She'd been lied to. By others. By him.

That would surely stir a tempest in her that could sink them all —and very likely land him in jail.

While he drank his tea and pondered the situation and the woman on his bed, Grace grew restless.

She stirred fitfully, as though more than her body aches bothered her. Twice she called out for others, once for Saul and once for her grandfather—though by the sound of her desperate cries it was more out of worry for them than her own safety.

Leo administered another small dose of laudanum, and this time she didn't fight him.

As he felt the *Destiny* take on the wind and waves of the wide Atlantic, he leaned back against the bulwark and continued

thinking about Grace. Within that slight frame of hers it appeared she harbored a steely core. Though clearly pampered, someone in her young life had nurtured her indomitable spirit and determination. Had she learned that from Thomas before he'd been cut from her life? Leo wondered what else she'd learned and if her resolve would get her through this voyage and her reunion with her father.

Rolling his aching shoulders, he wondered what a reunion with his own father would be like. He'd been raised by a hard-handed man, and dumped into an orphanage at age fourteen. Though he and his younger brother Benny had been rescued by a loving couple and welcomed into the Grayson family, Leo had no idea how his other siblings had fared because they were scattered to the winds.

Because of his father.

Because of Leo's own stupidity.

What would he say to his father if they were to meet today? Leo honestly didn't know. He thought he might punch him. Or scorch his ears with all the loathing he felt for the man. Or openly pity him for being pathetic and small. Even entertaining thoughts of his father set Leo's blood to boiling, and so he slammed the door on that revolting part of his life, and focused on Grace.

She seemed to be settling as if her pain was subsiding. The laudanum appeared to be working. He could get her through the worst of her recovery. But once she was fully awake there would be the devil to pay for him and his crew.

He'd been through enough storms in his life to know how to ride them out. Some needed to be faced head on. With some, it was safer to run the trough. In the most violent cases, heaving to was the only option. It all came down to tacking and angles and he was master of both.

They had more than five hundred nautical miles for him to calm the stormy Grace Covington and prepare her to meet her father—without revealing that the man was alive.

Chapter Six



Wind and waves and the creak of massive timbers lulled Grace deeper into the warmth permeating her body. She heard the scrape and squeak of iron trapped in a pendulum motion—back and forth and back again … and a man's breath, in and out, sure and even.

So warm.

So safe.

The smell of cedar and wet wool drew her away from the deep sleep she longed for. The wool scent reminded her of her granddaddy's tear-stained coat front as he'd held her in the days and weeks following her mother's death.

Granddaddy…

He was waiting for her.

He needed her…. She must hurry home to him!

She struggled against the lulling sounds of ocean, swimming upward from its depths. Desperate to break the surface, she flailed and gasped toward the light above her.

"Easy, Miss. Easy now," a male voice said from nearby.

She reached for the man's hand, wanting him to pull her from the depths.

She laced her fingers with his, using him as a buoy to keep her from slipping away. The firm commitment in his grip said he would protect her, anchor her, shelter her.

Shelter… she must find shelter… for her horse… for Saul....

"Saul!" She blinked, straining to see through the snowy blur,

desperate to find her brother.

"Your friend is quite safe, I assure you," a deep voice said.

As her vision cleared, she saw a figure looming in front of her, but it was not Saul.

"Rest easy, Miss," the man said. "I sent two of my men back to the inn where they found Saul with three other men, one they presumed to be your grandfather, talking with Myles, the innkeeper. My men confirmed Saul was alive and looked to be unharmed, so they returned to the ship, and we broke port."

Relief washed through her. Saul was alive. But this man hovering over her was the man from the inn… the one who had pulled her from the icy river. Her gaze darted past him and took in the room at a glance. She sucked in a breath of disbelief, realizing she was no longer on land, but in a large ship's cabin that smelled of cedar, of him.

Instinctively, she searched for her kaleidoscope.

"If it's your bag you're looking for, it's there. On the desktop," he said gently, as if reading her mind. He moved toward the sack sitting atop a wide, solid desk.

She struggled to focus her gaze, watching as the man—Captain Leo Sullivan, if she remembered correctly— leaned against the edge of the desk, as if trying to calm her by moving away from her.

The top of the desk held a huge map, its surface littered with several nautical instruments. Behind the desk, attached securely to the wall, was a series of cubicles, each one of which held what appeared to be more maps, all neatly rolled and tucked inside. Two large and unlit bullseye lanterns hung from heavy iron rings on each side of the cubicles, swaying with a rocking motion.

A few electric lights lit the area, and in the distance could be heard the steady beat of what sounded like some sort of steam engine she surmised was powering those lights. But the ship itself—it was pure sail for she could hear the snap of those sails and the whine of ropes pulled taut.

The rogue had carted her aboard a sailing vessel! Not only that,

he, or someone else, had divested her of her wet clothing following her unfortunate fall into the river.

Her face flamed and the shock of it all brought her upright, the quick movement making her head light. It was a long moment before she stopped swaying on the bunk—or rather, the captain's bed.

"I should not be h—here," she said through teeth that still wanted to chatter, although from panic rather than chills. If he'd ordered his crew to head out to sea, there would be no avenue of escape for her. "And I wouldn't be here if not for you," she added.

"If I hadn't come along when I did, you'd doubtless be at the bottom of the river… you and this bag you seem to value above your life."

He plucked the bag from its place on his desk and handed it over to her.

She winced as the weight of the sack pulled on her sore fingers.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I didn't think about your fingers being tender. What's in the bag?" he asked.

She lifted the velvet sack and glanced up at him. "Something that is important to me. That's all you need to know about this and also about me. All I need to know about you is that you're going to take me home. Immediately."

He nodded. "I'll return you home, but not for some time, I'm afraid."

His words made her blood run cold.

"You must return me at once," she demanded. "Fetch one of your crew and have him row me ashore. I'll see that you are paid well for your services."

"Even my best man can't row that distance. We pulled anchor and set sail hours ago."

"What?" A gasp of disbelief escaped her. "Why? I don't understand what you want with me."

"You will."

She didn't like the omen she sensed was couched within those

words.

Of a sudden, she became aware of the pitch of the ship, the constant sough of wind in sails, and the churn of a huge ocean of water. She'd thought they were at anchor.

She glared at him. "How could you?" She gaped at him, her disbelief quickly overrun by hard truth. "You trailed me from the inn, pulled me from the river, and then hauled me aboard your ship, just like a—a lowly pirate would do!"

"I'd have chosen to do this differently had we time—"

"What do you mean if we had time? And chosen to do what differently?"

"There is no gentle way to say this, so I will just out with it. I know who you are, Miss Grace Anne Covington, and I came here to do exactly what I've done: put you aboard this ship whether you agreed to be here or not."

"But… why? For a ransom?"

The captain looked confused for a moment, but resolve soon claimed his handsome features. "No. Suffice it to say, you are here for the time being, Miss Covington."

She didn't like his answer, not at all. She was an heiress about to marry into an even wealthier family. Not only could this handsome captain and his crew demand a ransom from her grandfather—and get it—they could then demand an even larger one from the Ketterings, unless he didn't know of her engagement.

"My grandfather will have your head for this outrage," she informed him. Even though Granddaddy would pay for her return, he would also strike fast and have his revenge of every hand aboard who foolishly thought he could get away with kidnapping her.

"I don't doubt that."

"Then take this ship back to port."

"I can't."

"You mean you won't."

"That's right. I won't take you home. Not yet. We've set a course due south—as for where and why, you'll understand once we get

there."

"Obviously, I haven't been clear enough, Captain Sullivan. My grandfather is a man of means, with extraordinary connections. There is no place you can take me that he won't find us. And when he does, mark my words, there will be no lenience for you. None."

The captain inclined his head to acknowledge that he'd heard her, but his gaze didn't waver. "Warning taken. Even so, we stay our course."

With that, he pushed off from the desk, his athletic body loose and at ease, as though he'd long ago made peace with what his actions might bring him in the end.

"These quarters are yours until we reach our destination," he said. "You aren't a prisoner. If you want to roam about, just pull the rope cord, near the bunk, and one of the crewmen will respond. I'll have meals brought to you, but know that you're free to join us in the galley if you prefer. The head is there." He nodded to the door just beyond the desk. "There are toiletries and clean linens and a bathrobe. Use whatever suits you."

He glanced back at her, his dark hair luminous in the cabin light.

For a moment, she could almost forget that he'd hauled her aboard his ship and away from her life, could imagine him as an attentive host. Almost.

"If you need anything else, just holler," he said.

"I need a captain who will listen to reason."

Captain Sullivan's strong, even teeth showed in a flash of white, as if he appreciated her spunk. "I'm actually quite reasonable as you'll see once we reach our destination," he assured her. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm due at the wheel in just under two minutes. That's what the bell you'll be hearing signifies. I just don't want you to think there's trouble. Shifts change every four hours at the bell, six times in a day."

With that, he headed out the door.

She watched as the latch fell into place behind him, her mind

swimming with all that had transpired. She should be racing after the man right now, demanding her release. But she didn't move. Was it just that she was too exhausted? Was it the lingering effects of whatever drug he'd forced on her? Or had her own avid curiosity about the man, his intentions, and their mystery destination immobilized her?

Chapter Seven



Grace was certain she'd remain awake through the night and spend the hours counting the number of times she heard the ship's bell ring. But she heard it only once, when Captain Sullivan had left the cabin to take command of the wheel.

After that, she'd made use of the lavatory, along with the towels she found there. Then she'd wrapped herself in a man's flannel robe that smelled of fresh air and fir needles mingled with cedarwood. Knowing it was the captain's robe had brought a flush of discomfort, but she'd had no other options. Clean and warm, she had fallen fast asleep atop the captain's bunk, snuggled under a blanket that smelled of ocean air and the fresh woodsy scent of the captain.

She awoke to light slanting through a porthole and a skylight above her, neither of which she'd noticed last night. Morning light streamed through each, coalescing and casting shades of ivory and pearl into the cabin—and shedding a new light on her situation.

She was captive here in this cabin on this ship with a man who commanded her attention as easily as he commanded his men. That knowledge, however unsettling and embarrassing, should have worried her. But oddly enough, she didn't feel threatened. She wasn't afraid. The captain had saved her, literally, treated her kindly, protected her privacy, and left her to decide how she would spend her time aboard ship. However highhanded he'd been in whisking her away from her home, he seemed remorseful rather

than vengeful or greedy—and that intrigued her.

Driven by curiosity and a need to escape the confines of the cabin, she sat up and shrugged off the blanket.

While she hadn't been accosted through the night, there was no guarantee she wouldn't find herself in that very predicament at some point in this lawless journey. She was probably the only female aboard this ship headed to only-God-and-Captain-Sullivan-knew-where.

It was time for the captain to answer some questions.

The chills she'd suffered last night were gone, as were the pins-and-needles feeling in her hands and feet, although they were a bit tender. Thankfully, it appeared that her fall into the frigid river hadn't done permanent damage.

At least one good thing had come of Captain Sullivan's arrival in her life.

As she swung her feet to the deck and gathered her bearings, she took note that the cabin was a solid male domain—from the woody scent she'd smelled on the captain to the exotic woods used in the construction of the quarters.

It wasn't an overly large space, but it was clean and orderly. The scent of cedar and sandalwood reminded her of a cool Pennsylvania woodland. It was a cabin crafted by skilled and loving hands, and tended with the same care.

Quickly dressing, she pulled on her now-dried skirt, blouse, hose, and half-boots she'd worn last night to the inn. Her cloak was nowhere to be seen—was it drying in a warmer spot on the ship? She wove her hair into a fat braid that draped over her right shoulder, and then she headed out into the companionway. Hopefully, she'd find someone aboard who was willing to listen to reason instead of to his captain.

But the first person she met just outside the cabin was a stout and muscled man whom she vaguely remembered as having accompanied the captain last night.

"G'morning, Miss Covington," he said, his voice loud, his words

steeped in some sort of a New England accent. “Glad I am t’ see you moving about on your own. Much bettah than last night, eh?” he asked. “That was quite a blatter that blew through and sent you into the river.”

Foghorns at the wharf in Philadelphia were quieter than this man’s deep voice.

“And you are?” she asked.

“First Mate A.C. Fogg, late of Fogg Island, Maine, at your service. Everyone calls me Fogg. In charge of cargo and crew, I am.” His chest puffed with pride and he all but snapped a salute, so pleased he seemed with his title and duties. Clearly, he expected Grace to be just as impressed.

But she was too busy trying to understand him. The man talked fast, used terms she’d never heard of, and added an “ah” sound to many of his words. And the letter “r” didn’t exist in his vocabulary, disappearing in words like cargo, which became “cah-go.”

As for his appearance, Fogg resembled a child’s wide spin toy that might topple to the side if it didn’t remain in motion. He had a barrel-like build and wore loose-fitting oiled trousers, a striped shirt, and suspenders. Atop his short-cropped, bushy brown hair sat a flannel-lined oilskin hat tilted back from his brow.

He seemed more eccentric than effective, but Grace knew looks could be deceiving. And that voice of his could surely cut through any howling storm on a wild ocean. But would this barrel of noise and bluster be willing to help her return home?

“I was heading to the galley before the others go back for the morning’s mugging-up and thought I’d ask if I could fetch you anything,” he continued.

“Mugging-up?” she asked.

“Leftovers from breakfast and some coffee to wash it down. Y’know, mugging-up.”

No, Grace didn’t know. She had never heard such a term. But her stomach rumbled, and if she was going to make it through whatever lay ahead, she needed to eat when she had the chance.

“I accept your offer, Mr. Fogg.”

“Then say no more and follow me.” He doffed his cap a few inches off his head, let it plop back in place, and then led the way through a well-lit companionway.

She was thankful for the narrowness of the passage, which allowed her to put her hands out on either side and brace against the walls as she followed the man and tried to get her sea legs.

She at first thought the lighting was manmade but soon realized it was a mix of light fixtures, mirrors and a few smartly-positioned prisms carved into the wood of the ship, the latter of which would reflect sunlight and moonlight into the area. The fixtures reminded her of the skylight in the captain’s cabin.

Fogg noted her interest in the mirrors and heavy blocks of glass. “They’re a trick used by mariners through the centuries, but these here were refined by Cap’n Sullivan.” He grinned. “Sometimes it’s a right sunny day walking through this area of the ship.”

“I can imagine,” she said, noting his pride in his captain’s work.

“*Destiny* is filled with the cap’n’s special touches. There isn’t an inch onboard that he hasn’t thought about and improved since he made her his own.”

They passed through an area that looked to be some sort of holding space for cargo. All sizes of crates and casks, each lashed with rope and netting, could be seen in the muted shadows through portals on either side of the passageway.

“Used t’ be nothing but cod from the Grand Banks in these holds, but the cap’n refitted her for moving cargo up and down the coast,” Fogg continued.

Wondering if the type of cargo could offer a clue to their destination, Grace asked about it.

Fogg, only too happy to talk about his work, said, “Loads of lumber, granite, and wine, though that be delivered days ago. What you see here be various goods and supplies bound for Crane Landing.”

“How far south is that?” she asked.

“Not south, miss. North. In Maine.”

“I see,” she murmured, dully realizing that the only cargo Captain Sullivan was bearing southward was her. But why? At whose order?

Her mood darkened somewhat as they entered into what was clearly a galley. Small tables with benches, all looking to be hewn right out of the hull, claimed one side of the area, a cookstove flanked by latched cabinets the other.

True to his word, Fogg got to work gathering some breakfast leftovers, which included a few apples, hardtack, boiled eggs still in the shell, and two cups of steaming coffee. He motioned for her to have a seat at one of the tables, then soon joined her on the opposite bench, sliding his hat off his head and putting it on the seat beside him.

They were the only two in the galley. All other crewmen, even the cook, appeared to have gone topside to tend to other duties.

Fogg slid her a steaming mug of rich-smelling coffee, then asked what she’d like to eat from their choices.

Always one with a hearty appetite, she motioned for one of everything.

Fogg grinned. “As what pleases you,” he said, and set a full plate in front of her.

Once they’d each had a few bites to eat, Grace got down to the business of negotiating her escape. “I need your help, Mr. Fogg.”

Her bluntness didn’t seem to bother him. “Just name it, and if I can help, I will.”

“I need to get home. Back to Philadelphia.”

“And you will,” he said. “Soon.”

“Not ‘soon,’ Mr. Fogg. Now. I need to get on my way immediately."

His brown eyes lost a bit of their sparkle as he set down his apple core, frowning. “If I could do what you ask, I would, but we’re under full sail and heading south at more than eleven knots as we speak. There be no turning this vessel about, Miss Covington.

Not right away, anyway."

"But you are second in command. You could make it happen."

"Not against the cap'n's orders," he gently corrected. "Besides, you have nothing to fear. No one aboard this ship would harm a hair on your lovely head, least o' all Cap'n Sullivan."

"But I will be hurt," she pointed out. "My reputation will most assuredly be harmed if I am not returned home at once." She leaned forward, reaching out and beseeching the man. "My grandfather will pay a great sum of money to see me safely home. That money could be put directly into your hands."

Fogg, looking mighty uncomfortable, pulled a kerchief from his pocket and mopped at his brow.

"Please," she added.

He grimaced as if wishing he could help. "I wouldn't accept a red cent for helping a lady in distress, and I would see you directly home if I could. But I can't be changing the tide of what will happen, Miss Covington. Just know that y' be safe and will be returned home when the time is right."

She lifted both palms up, frustrated. "When the time is right? What does that mean?"

"Exactly as I've said. Cap'n Sullivan has given his orders, and on this ship his word is law."

She sat back, knowing when to push and when it was futile to do so.

She watched as Fogg, having clearly decided to avoid any more uncomfortable topics, stuffed his handkerchief back into his pocket, then hunkered down over his plate and got to work devouring what remained there.

Grace forced herself to drop the subject and finish her own breakfast, her mind busy weighing how best to manage her situation.

When she was younger, her parents would read to her each night from the Fables of Aesop. She remembered the story of a mighty oak and tender reeds; of how the oak, remaining immovable

in the wind, was downed by it while the reeds, bending to the wind's force, ultimately survived.

She needed to be a reed to survive. She refused to allow this voyage and this captain to break her. But she might break him. The captain had overstepped himself and had put them both in a precarious position. Her reputation was at risk. His neck was at risk. If he didn't return her at once, they were both doomed.

"May I?" Fogg asked a few moments later, motioning to clear away her dishes once she was finished. "I need to get topsides."

"I'll join you. I have a few things to say to your captain."

Grace got to her feet and gathered up not only her own dishes but his as well, letting him know that while she wasn't a willing passenger aboard ship, she also wasn't a lily-livered one. Despite having well-paid staff at home who took care of kitchen duties, she wasn't above cleaning up her own mess. She thought she caught a gleam of admiration in Fogg's gaze as he plopped his hat back atop his head and pointed to a workstation at the opposite side of the galley.

Grace headed toward it, making quick work of cleaning the dishes, which Fogg stowed away.

"There be steps topsides just to the right, near the crew's quarters. We can take those," he said. As he led her there, he added, "I'm thinking I should head up first and alert the cap'n that y' be heading his way, but he's one to sense a storm when it's brewing. No doubt he knows that you'll be paying him a visit this morning."

"Good," Grace said, "because I'm expecting some answers from him."

A few minutes later, they stepped out from the hatch onto a deck filled with activity.

Her breath caught in her throat. A spray of ocean water washed up over the rail nearby as billows of sail snapped in the wind and a gray, leaden sky spread out above.

All about her, the crewmen of the *Destiny* moved in synch, as if each were a crucial part of a masterful machine. The scent of pine

tar tinged the air for only a moment before it was snatched away in a brisk ocean breeze that tasted of salt and… a thrilling sense of freedom.

The breeze tugged loose several long strands of hair from her braid, setting them to snap in front of her face. As she gathered the strands in hand and pulled them from her eyes, she asked Fogg, "Where is your captain?"

"At the wheel."

Without hesitation, she headed there, leaving Fogg in her wake.

He let her go, just like the crewmen let her pass by them. Everyone had an interest in her movements, it seemed, but no one was going to stop her. Each sailor paused in what he was doing long enough to slide the sea cap from his head and nod in acknowledgement as one by one they stepped aside to let her go by.

Because of the rocking ship and her tender feet, she wasn't moving with any great agility or even as fast as she had intended. It was deuced difficult to walk aboard a ship in motion, and walking "topsides" as Fogg had termed the area, was more challenging than walking through the companionway below with its walls on either side. Although she'd sailed several times on a much smaller vessel, her grandfather had never let the crew sail too far off the coast. It's as if he'd wanted to keep them close enough to swim ashore should the need arise. Being this far out on the ocean was… surprisingly exhilarating. She kept herself upright and moving, though, her gaze fixed on the captain who alone controlled her future.

He stood tall and sure at the wheel, facing the far horizon—that distant line of nothingness that was their final destination.

He cut a well-hewn figure, one made to maneuver a helm and its deck. He wore black trousers and a shirt of white lawn that molded itself in the strong wind to his muscled body, the sleeves rolled up past his tanned forearms. His hair, longer and blacker than she'd realized last night, was bound like a wolf's tail with what looked to be a thin leather tie that lifted in the wind.

"Captain Sullivan," she said, her voice crisp. "I'd like a word

with you."

She had to grasp the rope running along the gunwale in order not to be pitched to the deck as the ship met with wave after wave in the ever-moving ocean.

In contrast, the captain appeared as much at ease as if he stood in a drawing room and not atop a heaving deck. He greeted her with a nod and a tip of his brimmed captain's cap.

"I assumed you would, Miss Covington," he replied. And then he smiled, the sight of it absolutely disarming.

The man, like the sea that swelled around them, commanded a response just by his mere presence. She lifted her chin, unwilling to be swayed by him as she'd been last night. Taking the last few steps to him, she came to a standstill directly beside the housing of the compass and the helm. She had to reach out to steady herself against the structure that reached nearly to her chest.

"I didn't expect you to be up so early," the captain continued. "I'll see that breakfast is made for you."

"No need. Your first mate already saw to it. What I want you to do is turn this ship around and take me back to Philadelphia."

"We talked about this last night, Miss Covington—"

"Hardly that. You simply told me how it would be and then you left the cabin. Exactly who do you work for, captain?"

His gaze met hers. "I've owned and captained the *Destiny* for the past year. I work for myself."

It was clear he took great pride in those facts. Grace could see it in the set of his handsome mouth and in the depths of his dark eyes.

"Yet you've put this vessel and your captaincy at risk to abduct me."

"Abduct? Now there's a word could put a man in prison. As I recall, I saved you." The captain edged forward, closing the distance between them.

Her heart lurched in her chest. He was so close she could see the individual whiskers shadowing his strong jaw, could smell the woodsy scent of his shirt, his skin. It was a heady mix of sunlight

and cedar and amber… the result warm and inviting.

"Saved me?" she repeated, trying to ignore her reaction to him and keep her wits about her.

He nodded. "From the icy river, if you recall."

He drew nearer still. She wanted to step back and away. And she would—just as soon as she found her sea legs. But she was loath to leave this spot with the wheel and the housing of the compass offering support should another wave buck the ship. She had no desire to find herself tossed into another frigid body of water. "You said your men saw my friend Saul at the inn. Is that true, Captain?"

He scowled as if deeply offended. "Of course it is. We delayed our departure by more than three hours so we could investigate your friend's whereabouts. It seemed important to you to know what happened to him."

"It was, thank you, Captain."

The wind snatched at her hair again, making streamers of the loose strands. To her horror, one long curl wrapped about the captain's tanned wrist even as he continued edging forward, closer… and then right on past her, peering down.

At the compass.

He'd been leaning forward to view the compass, not get nearer to her. Her face burned as the captain lifted his hand from the wheel and uncoiled the bright strands of hair from around his wrist. The curled ends slid along his skin and through his long fingers before snapping in the wind once more.

She straightened, hot embarrassment—and something more, something she didn't recognize—stirring inside of her.

But the captain made no mention of it. Instead, he nodded to the horizon. "Got nudged off course by that last wave. We're good now."

The sight of him touching her hair had been startling. Intimate. She had to steady herself against the housing of the compass, but it wasn't just the bobbing ship rocking her off balance. Vexed by her reaction to the captain's nearness, she forced her mind back to the

issue of her kidnapping. “Who hired you to abduct me?”

“I wasn’t hired to do anything, Miss Covington. And this isn’t an abduction. It’s more of a… well, think of it as an adventure or exploration or an unexpected journey.”

“What?” She nearly laughed at his absurd suggestion.

“I’m just taking you on an unplanned voyage from which you shall be returned unharmed in any manner.”

“So I’m supposed to just go along with this unplanned voyage?”

“I wish you would,” he said, concern and apology in his voice.

She could only stand there speechless and shivering because she had no idea what to make of the man. Steadying herself with one arm, she wrapped her other arm about her waist, cold in the constant sweep of wind without her cloak.

Noticing her discomfort, the captain immediately motioned to a nearby crew member. “Rigby. Fetch the lady’s cloak. If it’s not dry, bring her one of my coats.”

“Aye, sir.” Rigby sprinted for the nearest hatch leading below.

Captain Sullivan returned his keen gaze to her. “There’s less wind if you stand here, at the wheel.”

Grace hugged her waist more tightly, trying to hide her shivering. Even so, she shook her head. For the sake of keeping a clear mind, she didn’t want to get any nearer to the captain than necessary.

“Please, I insist.” With his left hand still on the wheel, he took a step back, creating room in front of him. “Just until Rigby returns. You might have noticed he moves like a jackrabbit, so you’ll only have to tolerate me for a moment or so.”

It was his attempt at humor that made her move. And the cold, of course. Intentionally facing away from him, she stepped into the space between the helm and the man, sensing his tall, strong body as he came back into position just behind her. Warmth radiated from him. The feeling spread across her shoulders and down her back.

“Better?” he asked, the sound of his deep voice filling the shell

of her right ear.

A shiver traveled down her spine, but it wasn't from the cold. "Much better, thank you. It's almost as if the wind doesn't touch us here."

"That's right. Made a few alterations on the deck, cutting down the flow of air in this spot. Someday I'll build a full wheelhouse."

Grace thought what he'd already done was amazing. She was so much warmer now. But of course, his body directly behind hers had a lot to do with that warmth.

Around them the ocean lifted and rolled, another wave bucking the ship, tilting her off balance.

The captain steadied her, his right hand touching lightly to the small of her back; there and then gone, while his left hand kept firm hold of the wheel. However brief his touch, it sent a shock of warmth right through to her bones.

She eased forward, thinking the thrilling heat of his touch might forever stir inside of her. "Do you check the compass house every time the ship meets a wave like that?" she asked.

"Binnacle," the captain corrected.

She glanced at him over her right shoulder. "What did you say?"

He was smiling at her. "What you call the 'compass house,' it's actually called a binnacle."

"Oh. I see." She felt her face warm, wishing she knew more about nautical terms and life aboard a ship. She certainly ought to, given that her father had loved the ocean and sailing. "I-I've never heard the term," she continued. "I've sailed several times, yet I don't understand half of what comes out of the mouth of your first mate."

The captain's smile gave way to a genuine laugh. "Few people understand Fogg, in word or in action. A captain couldn't have a better first mate, though."

Grace felt her own lips tilt in a smile. Fogg, however difficult to understand, had garnered her admiration for his kindness to her and his loyalty to his captain. She turned her attention back to the

compass. “Do you look at the binnacle every time the ship encounters a rough wave?”

“I do. In fact, I check it often because we’ve got not only waves to worry about but currents and winds. And I compare what I see on the large compass to the two smaller compasses. There. Do you see?” He pointed to another area of the binnacle.

She peered inside to see the compasses as well as a lamp fixture.

“If there is one thing life has taught me it’s the importance of staying on course, especially at sea,” he said.

“And are we… on course now?”

“We are.”

The implication of his words wasn’t lost on either of them. For a moment that had been eased by light conversation, it had disappeared all too quickly.

An involuntary shiver rippled through her.

The captain noticed. “What’s taking Rigby so long? I’ll call to one of the other men to get your cloak.”

“I’m not cold. I just….” She lifted her face to that dreaded horizon. “I need to know I won’t be put in an even worse situation once we get to wherever it is you’re taking me.”

“You won’t. That’s a vow.”

“Are you dropping me off somewhere, leaving me to someone else, or—”

“I’ll be accompanying you until I deliver you back home. You’ll be as safe there as you are here. And trust me, every soul aboard this ship understands that you’re to be transported safely and treated with the utmost respect.”

Confusion swamped her. With every nautical mile they sailed, she was being taken further from her grandfather and Saul, from everyone she loved… from her comfortable life… and from the family she would soon marry into. But why?

“Is this about my grandfather, then? Is someone trying to make him suffer by taking me from our home?”

“No, Miss Covington. It’s nothing like that.”

“Because he will suffer. Greatly. And he’ll take swift action,” she went on, needing Captain Sullivan to understand. “When I told you last night that he has connections, I wasn’t exaggerating. Frequent guests at our home include the police commissioner of Philadelphia, even the owner of the Pinkerton Detective Agency in Ohio. I imagine they’ll be among the first people he turns to for help in finding me, but they won’t be the last. Mercenaries and guns-for-hire will be hunting you—all driven by the promise of a large reward for bringing me home.”

“I’ll be taking you home myself, Miss Covington.”

Unexpected warmth bloomed in her belly at his solemn oath. He’d said the words with such conviction. It seemed important to him that he be the one to deliver her home.

She gave herself a mental shake, irritated at the warmth his words caused inside of her. Of course it would be important to him. No doubt he’d personally want to beg her grandfather for leniency.

“When?” she pressed. “When will you take me home?”

“Just as soon as possible.”

“What determines that? What is it that has to happen? Because my grandfather won’t wait one second before setting others on our trail; he won’t risk my safety or the sanctity of our good name.”

“But you did. You risked both in dealing with Harwood at that tavern last night.”

The captain’s words sounded as blunt and unpleasant as what she’d done, but he was right. She had put her name and family and dear Saul at risk. She hated remembering anything about Harwood, especially what he’d taken from Saul and how that had made her feel.

“What would drive a well-bred, beautiful young lady like you to go to such a place and meet with the likes of Harwood?” he asked.

A treasure from the past.

A piece of my mother and father.

But Grace said none of that. Instead, she stepped out from the shelter of the captain’s body and faced him head on.

“I’ll answer your question, Captain, after you tell me where you’re taking me.”

Chapter Eight



Leo admired Grace Covington. Despite her situation, and even after enduring all she'd been through last night—dealing with Harwood, being separated from Saul, falling into the river, getting nipped by frostbite, and awakening to learn she was heading to a mysterious destination instead of home to her grandfather—she was standing strong and resolute in front of him. He applauded her spunk and tenacity.

And it grated on his conscience not to tell her the truth.

He wanted nothing more than to put her at ease, to calm and soothe her in any way possible. In every way.

But he couldn't. Not yet anyway.

He'd made a promise to a friend and he needed to see that promise through to the end, no matter how difficult.

Footsteps from behind told him Rigby was finally returning with her cloak.

Leo glanced at the younger sailor, one brow raised.

Rigby cast him an apologetic look. "Would've been here sooner, Cap'n Sullivan, but Micah wanted to press out the creases."

The young man held up the garment, which looked as if it had been tended with great care. But there he froze, obviously not sure if he should help the lady into it.

Leo would have reached for the garment himself, but Grace—Miss Covington, he corrected, having become so familiar with the beauty through Thomas's stories and Myles's reports that the name

Grace was first in his mind and on his lips—beat him to it, settling the cloak around her own shoulders and securing the ties.

"My thanks to you and Micah, sir," she said to the young sailor, and then offered a half-smile that seemed to leave poor Rigby speechless. The coolness returned to her gaze, though, as she settled her attention back on Leo, awaiting his explanation.

He motioned the young sailor back to his post, then put both hands to the wheel.

He noticed that even in the short time since she'd come topside, she was gaining her sea legs, finding her balance and strength amid *Destiny*'s constant movements. Whether Grace realized it or not, she was settling into the ship's subtleties.

The *Destiny* was a crucial part of his life, an extension of it. Witnessing Grace become one with it, watching as she awakened to its power and possibilities, was something he couldn't wait to share with Thomas. For the man to know that his daughter wasn't afraid of the ocean and even seemed to enjoy sailing would be a balm to Thomas's raw conscience.

Grace was no longer hovering near the binnacle and the wheel but had instead moved a short distance away, her stance sure and strong. While other women might cower with uncertainty in their quarters, Grace was managing the wind and ocean spray with a straight back and lifted chin.

Leo hoped she could face what lay ahead with that same courage. That he was about to alter her world weighed like ballast on his shoulders—just as his guilt did over what his own choices in life had done to his family. Taking her from Philadelphia had put Grace at great risk; himself, too. He hoped that in the end it would all be worth it.

"We're heading to Indigo Isle off the coast of South Carolina," he told her, deciding there would be no harm in sharing their destination with her.

She faced him, eyes focused and alert. "I've never heard of it."

He rubbed the palm of his right hand against his jaw. "It's a

small coastal island, sits just north of Charleston. Has a few summer homes near the waterfront. There is a good portion of the island that is woodland with small creeks fed by rainfall, all inhabited only by wildlife."

She appeared to think hard for a moment, a crease between her pretty brows. "I don't know anyone in South Carolina or on this place called Indigo Isle." The question in her eyes pierced him like an arrow. "Are you taking me to one of those summer homes?"

"I am."

"And then what?"

"I can't share that, I'm afraid, but you'll be safe. As safe as you are right here and now."

"And then what happens?" she persisted.

Leo dropped his hand from his chin to his chest, scraping it across the muscles there as if he could scrape away his guilt for causing Grace angst and leaving her filled with questions he wasn't at liberty to answer.

"All will be revealed as soon as you're on the island," he assured her. "Believe me when I tell you there's nothing more I'd like than to put your mind at ease, but your questions aren't for me to answer."

She seemed to think long and hard for a moment, and then she nodded once as if accepting his words as truth.

"I believe you, Captain." She glanced out at the rolling waves. "You asked why I was at the inn... I was there because Harwood is a thief and a tyrant. He took something of mine and was also cruel to someone very dear to me."

Saul, Leo guessed, but kept quiet.

"Under normal circumstances I would never go to the back room of that inn… but I couldn't not go. Shameful advantage was taken of my friend, a person who is physically strong and fiercely loyal but who oftentimes misconstrues the meaning of words and the intentions of others. Saul trusts too easily. Harwood made a sport of taunting him and taking his valuables—one of which was a gift

given to me by my father years ago."

She drew in a deep breath, as if to steady herself at the memory of a man she believed dead. Her gaze narrowed, and Leo guessed she was no longer viewing the ocean but the past and her father.

"Like you, my father was a man of the sea," she said. "Long journeys were commonplace for him and his crew. He made certain to bring me trinkets and treasures from his many ports of call. The last thing he brought home to me, one of the most cherished, was a kaleidoscope." She blinked as if to clear the past from her mind and then looked at him. "That's what Harwood had taken from Saul; it's what I had to retrieve last night."

Leo couldn't comment about her father and the kaleidoscope for he could see that the instrument was precious to her and the memory of her father even more so. To encourage any more words about the man felt wrong. Grace would be hurt and infuriated to realize he'd let her talk about her father in past tense all the while he'd been sailing her to his doorstep on an island.

So instead of asking more about the beloved kaleidoscope or the father she obviously loved so much, he said, "I'm sorry you and Saul had to endure all of that. I know you're not happy that I arrived on the scene, but I'm glad I did, Miss Covington. Men such as Harwood are as unpredictable as a water funnel at sea—you never know which direction they'll move or how much damage they'll cause you."

She acknowledged his words with a slight nod, and her shoulders seemed to relax a bit beneath her cloak. Maybe their honest exchange had eased her distrust of him and her apprehension over the unknown.

They remained like that, at arm's length from each other but not talking, for a long while. She watched the waves and the sails and the crewmen at work, while Leo simply enjoyed her nearness and this pensive and somewhat relaxed state of hers.

Gradually the wind picked up, scudding the clouds apart and away until there was nothing but a stretch of brilliant blue sky

above and beyond them. Sunlight coated the world, glistening in the ocean spray, skipping sparks of light atop the water, and reflecting in the bright white of the canvas sails.

He watched Grace tip her face skyward, her eyes drifting shut as she seemed to drink in the sudden warmth of the day.

"It feels as if I've had nothing but winter in my bones for so long," she said on a sigh, as though speaking to herself.

Had Leo not stolen her from home, and if he didn't know that she believed her father was dead, he might have asked her to elaborate… might have attempted to help ease her feeling of being alone. But he had no right to do any of that, and he knew it. Grace had been mourning a father who hadn't died. And he was sailing her south for a reunion that could leave her elated or devastated. He couldn't ask about the coldness that had claimed her for too long. It wasn't his business or his right to do so.

His first mate came to the wheel then. "Gotta good wind blowing aft, cap'n. What're y' waiting for?" Fogg asked. "I say you show the lady that the *Destiny* and her cap'n can shindig around."

Grace straightened, turning to Fogg, a quizzical look on her face.

He thumbed toward Leo. "The cap'n here, he's some pumpkins when it comes t' getting his ship moving at a fast clip," he said.

Grace crinkled her nose and glanced askance at Leo.

"That means he thinks I'm good at it," Leo replied, liking a little too much that she looked to him for a translation of the words.

"More than good," Fogg all but boomed. "He's a natural."

Leo glanced at his first mate, but he knew this was Fogg's way of reminding him that Thomas was dying and the sooner they got Grace to the man's bedside, the better.

He shot a look her way. "You might want to go below. Soon I'll have every sail drawing."

"I don't know what that means," she said.

"It means that the wind and the spray are going to increase with our speed."

"Sounds exciting," she said. "I prefer to remain on deck,

Captain."

Admiring her starch, Leo assigned a man to remain close to Grace to keep her safe, then shouted to his crewmen who reacted even before he could finish pulling out his leather gloves from a pocket of his trousers. Slipping them on, he put both hands to opposite spokes on the wheel, ready to hold the ship steady and see her through the increased speed.

Soon there were snaps from above as every piece of canvas was drawn tight. The wind, pushing the *Destiny* from behind, drove her fast over the water.

As Fogg gave a hoot of approval, Leo saw Grace plant her feet wide. She held tight to the jackline along the gunwale and watched the activity on deck with bright expectancy in her eyes.

"Reminds me of a fast run I once made," Fogg shouted over to her. "We were just coming out of the harbor, all of us aboard anxious. Once we cleared land, we felt the weight of the wind. Coming strong aft, it was. Soon we were logging near twelve knots, moving like a wild bull moose, every sail tight as a drum, the vessel just skimming over the ocean. In minutes, every one of us could feel her timbers trembling, so fast was she going—nearly fifteen knots by then, her bow cutting swiftly through the water."

"Oh, my," Grace said, her eyes filled with awe.

Fogg splayed his legs, his booted feet planted firmly on the sun-washed deck, his callused hands propped on his hips as he leaned into his tale. "We were going hellity-hoot with that wind, with the water washing over the sides as she downed and upped through foaming thunder. Though her hull was driven hard that day, she survived that feat and many more."

"You captained her, Mr. Fogg?" she asked.

"Not me. I be a first mate to the day they bury me at sea or on my island. No, your—another man captained her. A good man."

Leo nodded in agreement as Fogg's gaze met his, silently acknowledging his near slip of the tongue.

Grace was still caught up in the story, not seeming to notice

their private exchange. “How many knots are we going now?” she asked.

Leo motioned to Fogg, who headed to check the patent log on the taffrail. Fogg raised his hand and signed the number lest his shout be taken with the wind: Twelve.

Leo let a whistle slide through his teeth.

“I take it that’s good?” she asked.

“That’s good,” Leo replied.

She turned her face back to the view ahead. “I like it,” she said simply. “If you can get it to fifteen as Mr. Fogg and his captain once did, I think I’d like that, too.”

Leo grinned, pleased by her obvious pleasure as they raced the wind. “I’ll bet you would, Miss Covington. I’ll bet you would.”

GRACE TRIED to hold onto her sense of outrage at the injustice of being hauled off like a sack of gold, but she was too enamored of the undulating ocean stretching to the horizon and the creatures that lived in its inky depths.

The ocean breeze buffeted her, nudging, and tugging as if playfully inviting her to relax and embrace her adventure. Sunshine draped her head and shoulders with a warm cloak, sails snapped overhead, and the low roar of the ocean mingled with the scuffling of boots and occasional shouts of the crew as they encouraged *Destiny* to greater speed.

While they didn’t reach fifteen knots as she’d hoped, the captain and his crew marked more than thirteen, which Captain Sullivan told her was fast enough given the activity of the water a few nautical miles into their speed-driven run. Deep waves rolled all about the ship, looking at times as if the ocean would wash right over the sides. It never did, though, and the crew members simply continued manning the ship, each one of them as fleet on their feet as the schooner was at plowing through the waters of the Atlantic.

Captivated by all the action about her, Grace spent the remainder of the day on deck. She ducked below decks twice, once to use the necessary and once to eat a light lunch left in her cabin by one of the crew.

Although she'd sailed several times with her grandfather who'd hire a boat and crew for those occasions, the hours had never been relaxed or about enjoyment. They'd been about healing and overcoming her fear. Those first few times on a boat after the accident were murky memories of terrified tears and begging to go home. Her grandfather had taken her home eventually, usually with her in a state of trembling silence. It had taken many trips just offshore, and one horrifying reunion with the site of the accident, before she began to believe that the boat wasn't going to capsize, and that she and her grandfather wouldn't go to the same watery grave that had taken her mother and grandmother… and Saul's mother and father. Only then could she sail without panicking, but it wasn't something she'd chosen to do.

To realize how much she enjoyed standing on *Destiny*'s deck as the vessel cut through the open waters of the churning ocean, without a speck of land in sight, left her slightly bewildered and almost giddy. She had the sudden urge to share her revelation with someone, but every hand on deck was busy with their tasks, and even if she told them they wouldn't understand her monumental discovery.

Sighing, she stood alone watching the dipping sun and lengthening shadows until she grew too chilled to remain on deck.

No sooner had she returned to her temporary residence in the captain's cabin than a knock sounded on the door. She opened the heavy panel to find Rigby holding a tray laden with what was apparently her supper. She stepped aside, and he entered the room, placed the tray on the desk, tipped his cap, and left without a single word.

To her surprise, his silence left her feeling lonely.

Even though the crew had barely spoken to her when she was

topside, they'd watched her intently, one of them always within arm's reach as if positioned there solely to keep her safe.

Now she was alone.

In a room not her own.

Heading to a place unknown.

With a man who promised safety while carrying her farther from her home.

She should be angry and outraged, and she was, but to a shockingly small degree. The truth was it was a relief to be away from Fairview and her world of restrictions and obligations. She wouldn't have chosen to leave this way, but here she was and there was nothing to do but make the best of her situation. And why not do her best to enjoy her brief respite?

So went her thoughts, snapping through her mind as the wind snapped through the sails.

She longed for the captain's company. She could pretend that the feeling was merely a need to get answers from the man, but she wasn't in a habit of lying to herself. He intrigued her. She'd enjoyed learning how he navigated his ship. She wanted to know more. How did the sails work? Why were there so many ropes? And what were all the instruments that were now safely stored in compartments of his desk?

But those questions remained a mystery as she ate alone, prepared for bed, and tucked herself in with one of the books she selected from the captain's well-stocked shelf. Several pages into a Sherlock Holmes adventure penned by Arthur Conan Doyle, she drifted off to the sound of the bell and the gentle rocking of the *Destiny* in the arms of the Atlantic.

She was jostled awake in the predawn hours.

Slightly groggy from a deep and dreamless sleep, one she hadn't experienced in more years than she could remember, she sat up and sought the cause of whatever had disturbed her.

The ship rocked sharply.

A niggling concern wormed its way through her mind just as a

knock sounded at the door. Not waiting for her answer, whoever was outside pushed the door open a few inches.

"Miss Covington?" The captain's voice spoke quietly into the darkened cabin.

"Yes, Captain?" she replied, her voice husky, her mind reeling.

"Sorry to disturb you, but I wanted to let you know it will be a rougher sail for a spell and to assure you that you're quite safe."

"Is there a storm coming?"

"No. Just a stiff wind driving the water into a good frothing. *Destiny* will have no trouble pushing through, so sleep easy, if you can. Nothing to worry about."

The door remained ajar for a moment, as if he were waiting to see if she had any questions, but all she could think about was him and his crew. "Will you and your men be all right, Captain? Is there anything I can do to assist you?"

His low, warm chuckle slipped inside the cabin, the sound so intimate it made her sway on her bunk as if *Destiny* had just plunged into a deep trough.

"The crew and I will be quite safe, Miss Covington. And though I appreciate your offer of assistance, you'll help by staying right where you are. There's still a good two hours before sunrise so you may as well sleep if you can." With that, the door began to close.

"Captain!" Her voice came out louder than anticipated.

The door inched open again. "Something you need?"

"Will you wake me if… if things get worse?"

"Of course. But they won't get worse."

"Are you certain?"

"I promise. Although the rough waters will slow us down, the waves will likely settle by midday."

A sigh of relief escaped her. "I intend to hold you to that promise, Captain."

"Fair enough," he said. "Rest easy, Miss Covington."

But she didn't rest easy. She lay in his bed, her thoughts as choppy as the waves buffeting the ship. She imagined the ocean, a

vast darkness of frothing waves that rocked the schooner, that could do untold damage to a vessel, could swallow it whole without leaving a trace that it, or its passengers, ever existed. Could the captain and his men keep *Destiny* afloat? The thought of him at the wheel, his long hair snapping in the wind as he directed *Destiny* through the pre-dawn hours, was her only comfort.

Sounds that created an easy rhythm on a calm day became a cacophony of clanging, snapping, and banging that raised her level of concern. But the measured thudding and scuffling of boots on the deck, and the confident shouts of the crew told her they were in charge and unconcerned about the rough sea.

At some point she drifted off, and it was well after sunrise when she woke again and realized with some surprise that she'd nodded off despite her concern.

The *Destiny* still pitched to and fro more than she found comforting, but it was noticeably less than when the captain had visited her room during the night to warn her about the rough conditions.

After washing and dressing, she straightened the bed and left the cabin. Just outside her door, within a small cubbyhole built into the wood, she found two boiled eggs and a biscuit wrapped in a cloth, likely left by Fogg or Rigby. Rather than eating alone in the cabin, she tucked the eggs in the cloth with the biscuit and took her breakfast topside. She spied a small nook between two large coils of rope that seemed a good place to stay safe and out of the way. Sheltered from the brunt of the wind, she sat gingerly on a plump burlap bag, hoping she wouldn't break or crush whatever it contained. There, with the sails snapping overhead, and the shuffling feet of working men exchanging laughs and orders, she ate her breakfast and listened to the music of a ship at sea.

Chapter Nine



During the late afternoon, Grace watched as the cold weather was left behind in *Destiny*'s churning wake. Wherever they were, she could feel warmth in the wind.

Though she fretted over how Saul was doing and what he and her grandfather must be experiencing at her disappearance, she'd believed the captain when he promised she would remain unharmed and he would personally escort her home.

Thinking about her fiancé and what his family must be going through was an altogether different worry, though. Grace and Devon Kettering had been friends forever, it seemed—and either affianced or expected to become betrothed for just about as long. It was his mother, Victoria Kettering, who could put Grace to feeling like she was a mop in a broom closet.

She could only imagine what the powerful maven of the Kettering family might do once she learned of Grace's plight. Like Granddaddy, Victoria Kettering was a force to be reckoned with. She hailed from a "first family" of Philadelphia, tracing her roots back to the founders of the city. When Victoria Kettering walked into a room, everyone noticed. She could bring anything into fashion… or see that same thing coolly ignored. She wielded power in not only the highest echelons of society and the best of drawing rooms but also in the political arena.

She'd always been kind to Grace through the years. But then again, Grace had done nothing to draw a jaundiced eye her way.

She'd been the epitome of a perfect future daughter-in-law.

Until she'd daringly entered the Lion's Den to confront Harwood.

Until she'd been kidnapped by a man, a very handsome, virile captain, who'd swept her away without a thought to her wishes, who was even now striding across the deck toward her.

"Captain Sullivan," she said, admiring how easily he moved, all graceful sinew and hard-made muscle. "You're done manning the helm?"

"For now," he answered, a light smile on his face that made her legs a little weak. "I'll take another turn at the wheel before too long."

She'd seen how he worked just as hard as the rest of the crew. She'd spent a good portion of the day on deck, listening to the crew banter, picking up words like lanyard and turnbuckle and fiddle block that were foreign to her. She'd observed with avid interest as the men manned the sails, worked with ropes, and engaged in tasks that left her bewildered. The only job she understood at a basic level was that of manning the wheel and keeping the vessel on course, which seemed to be a job the captain favored.

She watched as he motioned to the youngest of the crewmen, Micah, who came her way rolling a banded wooden barrel, and Rigby following with a laden tray in his arms.

"What's this?" she asked as Micah tipped up the barrel and positioned it close to the hull while Rigby set the tray atop it.

"An early dinner. On deck," said the captain. "I thought you might enjoy it, seeing as how the weather has settled into a pleasant afternoon. I know the crew is looking forward to it."

Even as he said the words, other crewmen came her way, several with more platters of food—ham sandwiches with the bread and meat thickly sliced, mashed turnips and tomato chow chow—and another with plates, cups, and forks, all of which they placed on a large tarpaulin spread across the deck. By that time, Micah had the barrel tapped and was pouring out cups of a golden-hued drink for

all.

"Apple cider," Micah told her, "from Crane Landing. I guarantee you'll like it—or I'm not a third generation Maine Crane."

Grace couldn't help but smile. "I'm sure I'll love it," she said, taking the cup he passed her, and then accepting a plate with a large sandwich atop it alongside helpings of mashed turnips and tomato chow chow.

There was much joking and camaraderie as the crew members settled down around the deck to enjoy their meal together. Grace wished she could feel as at home on *Destiny* as the men did. But she couldn't. Her home was miles and miles away. They ribbed their captain just as easily as they did each other. It was clear the men greatly admired him and were proud to sail under his command.

Despite her situation, she couldn't help being captivated by their stories and exchanges of friendship and warmth as she sat atop one of the bitts, her plate balanced on her knees and her drink at her feet.

Captain Sullivan, standing nearby with a cup of cider in hand, watched her over the rim. "Does the meal suit you?" he asked, gesturing to the forkful of mashed turnips she'd just eaten.

"It's all delicious. I used to imagine doing this sort of thing with my father," she said, her voice growing soft with the memory of a man she missed so deeply. "He'd promised that when he returned we would picnic aboard his ship, but…." She shrugged and sighed. "He never came home from his last voyage." With her words, something seemed to shift in the captain's gaze; a lightness that had been there was gone now, shuttered away.

He finished his drink, then motioned for Rigby to pass him a sandwich. "I'll take it to Fogg while he mans the wheel."

Grace watched him walk away, wondering if she had said something wrong or inappropriate.

"Don't mind the captain," said Micah, offering to refill her cup of cider. "He never rests for long. Always doing something, that one."

Grace lifted her cup, nodding her thanks as Micah took it, refilled it, and passed it back to her. “Have you known him long?” she asked.

“Since I was a lad. And because of him I’m alive to mark another birthday. Just turned eighteen,” Micah said. “Years ago, the captain’s best friend, Adam Grayson, saved me from drowning in a frigid, log-jammed bay I’d fallen into. And the captain got in a skiff and came to help, pushing the logs clear and risking his own life to get to us.”

Grace could easily imagine Leo Sullivan braving heavy logs to help his friend and a young boy out of danger.

“That must have been horrible for you,” she said.

“It was,” Micah acknowledged. “But thanks to Mr. Grayson and the captain, I came through okay. I always thought he’d marry my sister and become my brother-in-law.”

“Who, Mr. Grayson?”

“No. The captain. He seemed to be sweet on Mary for a while.”

The tug of jealousy surprised Grace. How ridiculous for her to feel such a thing. She didn’t even know the captain. He’d taken her from home, with no full explanation of why, and she was feeling jealous? Surely her dunk in the Schuylkill River had addled her brain.

Still, it was there, an edge of discomfort at hearing that he’d been sweet on a woman. Grace hadn’t once thought of him as a man who might have given his heart in the past… who might still be sweet on someone. But the idea created a niggling unease in her.

“They’ve remained good friends,” Micah was saying. “And just recently I signed on to *Destiny*. Captain Sullivan is sharing his knowledge of sailing and navigation with me. I’m learning it all from the bottom up. Like he did.”

Grace told Micah she was certain he would do well, which she honestly believed he would, but her thoughts were more on the captain and the confusing emotions he stirred within her.

She fell silent as everyone around her finished eating. One by

one they got to their feet, gathering up plates and cups, readying to get back to work.

Micah motioned for her dishes. “I’ll take those below if you’re finished.”

“Do you know where we’re going?” she asked, passing her plate to him, hoping her question would catch him off guard and garner her an honest answer.

“Yes, Miss. We’ll reach Indigo Isle tomorrow.”

She came instantly alert. She hadn’t realized they were so close to ending this odd journey south. Knowing so unsettled her.

Why hadn’t the captain told her? No doubt it was because he figured she would become a bundle of nerves, which she was.

“The captain wanted you to have the pleasure of supper on deck and to enjoy the sunset afterwards,” Micah continued. He passed her dishes to Rigby and then sealed off the barrel of cider, tipped it to its side, and began to roll it back below decks. “Enjoy the view,” he added.

Grace watched them all leave, and then glanced to the west where Micah had pointed. Sure enough, the sun was ranging downward in a slow slide that smeared a riot of color across the sky.

In the yellows, oranges, and fiery reds, she saw every sunrise and sunset of her youth—the ones she’d viewed with her father from the docks in Philadelphia. The Port of Philadelphia had been a favored spot for father and daughter—and the place she’d last laid eyes on him.

The memories caused a bone-deep ache within her. God help her but she missed her father. Thomas Covington had been her entire world, especially after losing her mother. And when her grandfather had broken the news of her father’s death, merely weeks after her mother’s death, it had shattered her, left her clinging to the rocks in a merciless sea. Even now, twelve years later, the pain of her father’s death cut through her like a hand saw.

Caught up in the memories and melancholy, Grace slowly

became aware of the sound of a guitar. To her surprise, the captain was on the foredeck, one knee bent, his booted foot against the gunwale as he strummed metal strings, the soft notes floating out across the ocean.

Drawn to him as if in a dream, she headed for that part of the ship just as the sad melody dissolved into a flutter of notes that drifted away on the breeze.

"I've never heard that song before," she said. "What is it called?"

"Regret," he said hoarsely, his gaze focused on the distance. As if catching himself revealing too much, he shrugged and added, "That was just me doodling to warm up my fingers."

She didn't believe it. The emotion she'd felt emanating from those mournful notes intrigued her too deeply to walk away. Against her better judgement, she said, "I sensed truth behind that word regret, Captain Sullivan. Yet you intentionally shrugged it off. How did you learn to play?"

He hesitated a moment, as if wanting, even needing, to acknowledge the song's origins.

"The first few chords, I learned from a man named Cyrus Darling, the man who became my guardian. The last, life taught me."

She realized then that this handsome man who had blown into her life and literally swept her away was more than just a proud, capable captain of a schooner, but one who harbored his own pain, maybe even demons.

The man was a puzzle of disparate pieces that didn't seem to fit, pieces that confused her—and made her wildly curious. It seemed impossible that the strong, stubborn man who had pulled her from the Schuylkill River, hauled her aboard his ship, and was taking her against her will to a place unknown to her was the same man who had captivated her with his beautiful music and pain-filled eyes. How did the pieces fit together? And what would the complete puzzle of Captain Sullivan look like?

The question demanded an answer. One she had no business

asking. She knew that, but she'd been inquisitive and precocious from the day she was born, and so she plunged ahead, convincing herself she had every right to ask questions of her captor.

Because that's what he was. A man holding her against her will.

And so, deciding to box him in as he'd done to her, she lifted her chin, boldly met his eyes, and asked, "Why did a man named Cyrus raise you?"

One dark eyebrow quirked up, and his fingers stilled on the strings, as if her bold question surprised him.

"Perhaps I'm being a bit forward, Captain, but I would like to know more about the man holding me captive."

His eyebrows slashed down. "You're not a captive, Miss Covington."

"No?" she asked, gesturing to the vast ocean around them.

His mouth parted as if he would argue the point, but then he gave a slight nod. "You have a point. Cyrus raised me and my youngest brother Benny because we were homeless."

Her breath sailed out and sympathy rolled in. "What?"

"We were orphaned and needed a home. Benny wasn't even two years old, and I was too young to provide for us. Cyrus and Tansy, his wife, took us in." The captain's jaw tensed as if the memory was painful.

"Oh my… That must have been a terribly frightening time for you and your brother."

He inhaled and strummed a chord as if to dismiss her probing question. "Cyrus had a gut-stringed Martin guitar that was tobacco brown with a fat, warm sound that could make a person weep. I was utterly fascinated with the instrument. Cyrus would teach me in the evenings after school and work." The captain slanted a half-grin at her. "I bought this guitar a week before I left for university. I confess that I spent more time playing songs than studying."

A smile lifted her lips. "How long were you at university?"

"Just shy of a year." He shrugged. "I was more interested in building ships and playing guitar, so I moved to Crane Landing to

work at Crane and Grayson Shipbuilding."

"Is that where the *Destiny* was built?" she asked, intensely interested in the personal side of the man responsible for her presence on said vessel.

"Yes, but many years before I was born. We refurbished and outfitted her at the shipyard last year."

That news surprised her. The captain seemed so assured and capable in sailing the ship that she'd assumed he'd been doing so for a number of years. "So you've only been sailing a schooner for a year? Should I be concerned about your competence?"

Releasing a laugh, he took his foot off the gunwale and tucked the guitar under one arm. "I began learning to sail when I moved to Crane Landing several years ago. I learned from one of the best. I've been sailing my own vessel for the past year. I can assure you that you're quite safe, Miss Covington. No need for concern."

She arched an eyebrow and gave him a pointed stare.

He visibly winced but skillfully distracted her by lifting the guitar and offering it to her. "Would you like to try? I can teach you a couple chords before I need to return to work."

A breathless laugh left her mouth. "I wouldn't know where to begin," she said.

"I'll show you."

She would like that, but doing so would put her too close to the captain. However charming he was being, he was still the man carrying her away from her home. "I'd rather hear you play."

It was just the slightest movement of his dark eyelashes, but she thought she saw a flash of disappointment in his eyes. But trying to see beyond the captain's facade was like trying to see the bottom of the ocean.

Instead of pressing her, the captain cradled his guitar and let his fingers move across the strings.

She stood near him, listening to the melodic sound of his guitar, feeling the undulating ocean gently rocking the ship, letting the moment fill her.

As the sky darkened overhead, her gaze traveled the stars, moving from one point of light to another until she was thoroughly lost. “I’ll never understand how my father could navigate by the stars,” she said. She looked at the captain, now merely a shadow in the lowly lit deck area. “He told me that all captains worth their salt can navigate by the stars alone, but I can’t imagine how that’s possible.”

“It’s not that difficult, really.” Carefully tucking his guitar out of the way for safekeeping, the captain moved in close to her. “First, you mustn’t wait until nightfall. You begin at twilight when you can see both the horizon and the stars.”

“Is that important?” she asked, surprised. “I’d have thought the brighter the stars the easier it would be to navigate.”

“Navigation is about determining your position relative to your destination. If you can measure the angle from the horizon to the star that’s ninety degrees overhead it will give you your position. It’s more complicated if you can’t use the horizon to measure the angle.”

“How so?”

“Without the horizon in view, you would need to use a sextant to measure angles based on the position of at least two stars.”

She released a light laugh. “I’m already lost, but truly interested.”

His answering chuckle warmed the night. “Imagine an upside down funnel,” he said. “The tip of the spout is the star. The bottom of the funnel is a large circle. We are somewhere on that circle. We determine that by using a sextant to measure the angle *inside* the funnel. Then we sight another star, take another measurement, and calculate the circumference of that circle. Where those circles intersect means we are in one of those two places. So we sight another star, measure again, and finally where those three circles intersect is where we are.”

Shaking her head in amazement, she looked up into his shadowed face. “Although I finally understand the concept,

measuring angles and calculations and intersecting circles makes my head hurt. I'm afraid I would be hopelessly lost at sea should I have to depend on the stars to take me home."

His laugh washed over her, bathing her with warmth and a familiarity that surprised her. Maybe the sudden longing she felt to be taken in his arms was simply the thrill of being truly on her own for the first time in her life, standing on the deck of a ship under a night sky with a dashing man. She had been under lock and key from her grandfather's overzealous protection for so long that she'd forgotten what it felt like to push boundaries.

But she did have boundaries and obligations and commitments that she would return to when the captain took her home.

And so she thanked him for the lesson, bid him goodnight, and sought the sanctuary of her cabin. But every nook and cranny of his quarters reminded her of him… and the shameful attraction she was feeling toward her captor.

Chapter Ten



The next morning, Grace rose and dressed quickly, then hurried topside expecting to see Indigo Isle looming in the distance, but all she saw was ocean. A flurry of activity consumed the ship as the captain and crew struggled with one of the sails that draped across a major portion of the deck and hung listlessly from the mast.

Her attention remained focused on the men who spent a great deal of time assessing the problem and determining the best course of action for repairing the sail. She didn't know if the issue was with the sail or the mast, and she wouldn't have understood it even if she knew, but their decreased speed appeared to be vexing the captain who made his way to her side.

"I'm afraid our arrival will be delayed," he said, an urgency in his voice she hadn't heard before.

"What's wrong with the sail?" she asked.

"The sail is fine, thankfully. But one of the crosstrees came free of the braces securing it to the mast, and it needs to be reattached." He proceeded to explain that this involved an intricate maneuvering of the rigging to allow the men to repair the crossbar, and then the long, complex process of readjusting the ropes and cables that raised and controlled the sail.

"Why so many different ropes?" she asked, mesmerized by the tangled web spun from deck to sky, or so it seemed as she craned her neck to see the top of the mast towering above them.

Though the captain was kind enough to briefly explain the

different ropes used for standing rigging, running rigging, foot ropes, anchor cables, and why they used hemp rope for halyards, he seemed distracted and frustrated by the delay.

"Is our arrival an urgent matter, Captain?"

The way he looked at her, as if it were a matter of life and death, sent a flood of panic through her.

But instead of answering, he sighed and gestured toward the dangling sail. "This will set us back a few hours, but we'll arrive before the sun sets."

Before the sun sets. It sounded ominous to Grace, and left her feeling as deflated as the dangling mainsail.

With a nod to her, the captain left her alone and returned to the wheel.

Although the crew worked diligently on repairing the problem, they still hadn't solved the issue when Grace returned from the short respite she'd taken in her cabin. It was just after noon when a cheer rose up on deck and the sail was back in place.

With a steady wind once again filling the sails, she stood on the deck while *Destiny* sped toward their destination. The captain informed her that they were behind by several hours, as if their delay should concern her, and they wouldn't arrive at Indigo Isle until that evening. So she spent her final hours in the bracing wind and sunshine, her gaze fixed on the horizon.

As the evening sun bled colors across the water and the looming landscape, any remaining magic that Grace had found aboard the *Destiny* during the voyage disappeared as Fogg announced they were approaching Indigo Isle.

There was no laughter and no music now. Every crew member was quiet, most avoiding her gaze.

She looked out at the small island looming in the distance. Why had Captain Sullivan brought her here? Of all the hours she'd spent mulling over this ominous question, she simply couldn't fathom a reasonable explanation. Despite the captain's denial, the only thing that made any sense at all was that she'd been kidnapped for

ransom. But he'd insisted she hadn't.

Well, whatever the reason behind the captain's unlawful act, it was time for her to just face it—whatever it might be.

Minutes after the crew dropped anchor, the captain stepped forward and clasped her elbow to help her down the pilot ladder to the rowboat.

She pulled away. "I can manage on my own," she said.

And she did.

Chapter Eleven



Evening sun and shadows washed the expansive beach of Indigo Isle as *Destiny*'s rowboat approached. Grace sat on a middle seat looking over Captain Sullivan's strong shoulders as he manned the oars. From beneath her lashes, she stole looks at the man in front of her, a very handsome man, a man who commanded men and captained his own ship—a man who had kidnapped her.

A man who confused her.

Why had he brought her here?

Wildly curious and apprehensive for what might await her on shore, she shifted her attention between the captain and the beach they were approaching.

He didn't speak, didn't offer a word of assurance, but she knew he wasn't oblivious to her. Her furtive glances at him assured her that he was taking in everything about her, her tense shoulders, her lifted chin, her mock calm.

The sound of oars dipping in and out of the water mingled with the screech of seagulls and the sound of the captain's measured breathing—his inhale as he lifted the oars from the water, his exhale as he sank the oars and pulled, conveying them closer with every breath, with every stroke, in… out… strong and steady, closer… closer....

Her own breath came shallow and fast. She laced her fingers and clenched her hands on her lap. She could do this. She had survived hell. Twice. Whatever awaited her on the island, she would survive

that, too.

As they neared the island the captain passed the oars to Fogg who sat at the back of the boat behind her.

She paid little attention, though, for her gaze was locked on the shore of the low-lying coastal island. A stretch of white sandy beach licked by eddies of foam gave way to about half a dozen homes built atop high wooden posts or mortar foundations, each claiming a sprawling area of beach land. But just when she thought they would head directly for the group of what looked to be summer retreats, the captain shifted direction, nudging their boat southward. Grace watched as they skirted the shore for several long minutes, the beach disappearing into a low bank of rock that gave way to a swath of grassy marshland. Finally, as they rounded the southern end of the island a lone house came into view, set far back from a deep and beautiful beach of glistening sand. Her breath caught at the sight of it. Large and sturdily built, the cerulean blue house boasted two stories, a wrap-around porch with white railings and columns, several big chimneys, and a high brick foundation.

It was so eerily similar to the home her father had described for her and her mother that Grace's arms were awash with gooseflesh. She remembered vividly the picnics they'd shared on a blanket spread on the Schuylkill riverbank. With a basket filled with treats that she, at nine years old, couldn't leave alone, they would dream together as a family. Those memories were so intense, so tangible that she could smell the fried chicken wafting from the picnic basket and hear her mother's soft laughter and her father's deep voice as he described the perfect summer home in his imagination and shared that vision with them.

The pain of losing those moments, the warmth of her parents' arms, the innocence of believing they would always be in her life, bit down with jagged teeth. Already shaken and trying to stave off panic over what awaited her on shore, she dumped the memory into the ocean lapping at the sides of their boat.

She needed to keep her wits about her.

Shore was fast approaching, and she didn't have long to settle her thoughts before they came up to a sandbar. Captain Sullivan stepped out to pull the boat ashore. Grace stiffened her spine in preparation for wherever this unnerving journey would lead.

The captain helped her out of the boat and escorted her up the beach toward the big house she had been admiring. Before she had a chance to ask questions about the house or its owners or why the captain was bringing her to this place, she heard a sound that stopped her cold.

Her father's voice floated to her on the breeze.

It wasn't real. She knew that. It was just an illusion drummed up by her aching heart and memories inspired by the lovely setting. Inhaling, she cautioned herself to calm down. There was no going back. She knew that. The presence of Captain Sullivan at her side assured her that they weren't leaving until he'd accomplished what he'd set out to do by bringing her here.

"My sweet Gracie…"

The sound of her father's voice floated to her again—and she remembered the way he would roll the "r" and linger over the long "a" sound of her name. A lifetime of feelings and of the moments they had spent together and all the moments they had lost rushed through her.

Her attention shifted to the screened-in porch where a man stood in the shadows. His stance was disconcertingly familiar; the way her father used to stand with his left hand on his hip, weight shifted to that side—his "face-the-world-I-can-do-this" stance, her mama used to call it. But it couldn't be him. She knew that. It was simply a trick of the sunlight and shadows and sound of the ocean surf and her own jittery emotions. But as the man stepped from the shadow of the porch into the evening sun, and impossibility became reality—hard, wrenching reality—Grace lost all strength in her body. Her knees gave out and she stumbled forward as if she'd been hit from behind by a breaking wave.

All she could hear was the roar of the ocean crashing in her ears.

“It’s all right,” Captain Sullivan said, clasping her elbow to keep her on her feet when she would have crumbled.

Disbelief and hope and heartbreak swirled together like a whirlpool in her mind, making her dizzy, making her wobble on her feet.

The onslaught of questions and her wildly swinging emotions left her speechless. This man couldn’t be her father.

And yet he was.

And he was here…

“Papa…?” The question slipped out in breathless wonder… and disbelief… and the bone-deep hope of a little girl.

She had dreamed of a moment like this all her life. During the worst of her grief and in times of intense loneliness, she would pretend her father was still alive, shipwrecked somewhere and unable to come back to her. Common sense, and her grandfather’s assurance of her father’s demise, would rule her head most days, and yet in her most private heart she had fiercely guarded that small flame of hope that her father was alive, that he loved her, that he would come back for her.

And here he was… alive… calling her name as if he’d never been away.

As if his abrupt disappearance and presumed death hadn’t shattered her world.

The young, desperate girl in her strained toward the man on the porch, eager to run to him, eager to be held in the safety of her father’s arms, to be reassured that he loved her, that all would finally be well again

But it wouldn’t.

Because he was alive.

And he hadn’t come back for her.

He hadn’t written to her.

Not one word in twelve years…

As reality sank in, the truth of his betrayal tore through her with brutal force. It hit her square in the chest, forcing a sob of denial

from her and knocking her back a step.

Captain Sullivan tightened his grip on her arm. To keep her on her feet? Or to keep her from running?

She stood there staring at her father, torn asunder, desperate to rush into his arms for the hug and love she'd been so long denied.

But the outraged anger of a grown woman leashed the eager child within her, held that child back from wading too far in, agonizingly aware that the rip current below the surface could sweep her, and everything in her life, away.

"Grace, honey…" Her father, an old man now leaning heavily on a cane as he struggled to close the distance between them, was speaking to her. "I'm sorry to shock you this way. I can explain…"

That he was really here, really alive—and had been every minute of every day that she had suffered his absence was… unfathomable.

Backing away, she shook her head. She couldn't listen. All these years of missing him, of drowning in an ocean of grief… and the whole time he was alive, living here, in the home he had dreamed up on a picnic blanket with his wife and daughter. While her world had been dark and shattered by grief, his had been filled with sunshine, warm sand, and cerulean blue skies.

She couldn't bear another word.

Choking back a sob of pain and outrage, she spun on her heel and stumbled down the beach to where Fogg and the rowboat were waiting. Her father called after her, his voice weak, but she didn't stop, didn't look back, didn't care. She was leaving. There was nothing her father could say to excuse such a heinous betrayal.

She wanted to go home. To her grandfather. To the one man in her life who loved her and would protect her from all of this.

She didn't want her father's explanation. She didn't want to hear his reasons for not coming back for her. All she wanted was to escape him and the unbearable agony gripping her heart.

At the shore where the ocean churned the sand, Captain Sullivan caught up with her. He clasped her elbow and gently turned her to

face him.

"Miss Covington," he said, his expression filled with apology. "I wish I could have prepared you for this. I'm sorry."

Outraged to the point of violence, she slapped his face. "How could you be so cruel?"

He stood solidly before her, his face composed, his eyes filled with remorse rather than anger.

She clenched her fists to keep from slapping him again. "You should have told me."

"It wasn't my place," he said. "Your father wanted a chance to explain all of this to you face to face."

She laughed, the sound brittle and bitter even to her own ears. "After twelve years, he suddenly needs to explain his absence? How can he possibly justify being alive and never once contacting me?"

"It's a long story, Miss Covington, and one you should hear from him."

Incredulity swamped her. "What could he possibly say to excuse such a cruel betrayal? He let me think he was dead!"

"Your father is a good man. Give him a chance to explain."

Unable to respond, even to argue, she crossed her arms and tried to hold herself together. But it was like trying to hold an armful of sand. During the hundreds of miles it had taken to get here several scenarios had played out in her mind. She had been kidnapped for ransom perhaps. Or she had been kidnapped to punish her grandfather for a reason unknown to her. Or maybe the captain had kidnapped her for someone else. But she hadn't once considered that someone else would be her father.

But that is exactly what had happened. Her father had sent Captain Sullivan to fetch her and bring her here.

Because he'd decided he needed to see her.

After twelve years.

Years that he was living and laughing and enjoying life. Years that she was grieving and coping and just trying to survive.

Crushed by questions demanding answers, she unleashed them

on the captain. “Why did my father have me kidnapped? Why couldn’t he have come to see me? What has he been doing that was so important he couldn’t let me know he was alive?”

“Those are questions your father must answer,” the captain said.

She met Captain Sullivan’s dark eyes. “How long have you known my father?”

“Long enough to understand how much he loves you.”

A huff of disgust and disbelief passed her lips before she could stop the unladylike response. But she didn’t care. Her father deserved her disdain. And Captain Sullivan deserved more than a slap across the face for what he’d done to her. Her grandfather would see him imprisoned for this offense. But rather than soothing her ire with the captain the idea of his imprisonment left her decidedly uncomfortable.

She straightened her spine, drew herself up as she pulled herself together. She was done crying over a father she’d adored. She was done grieving and wishing for the impossible. That dream of reuniting with her father had turned into a nightmare. Her beloved father, the man who had once protected her and cherished her, was nothing but a selfish, cruel fraud. She was done here.

“Captain Sullivan, I demand that you take me home or to the mainland and nearest train station,” she said, her voice strong and steady.

A visible wince crossed his face. “I can’t do that yet.”

“You misunderstand me, Captain Sullivan. This is not a request. I demand that you return me at once or you’ll rue the day you met me. That’s a promise.”

“I deserve every bit of your anger and your scorn, Miss Covington. And you have my word that I will return you home. But before I do that, you should know that your father is extremely ill and that… this will likely be your only chance to reunite with him before—” He broke off, stared out into the ocean for a moment, then faced her with renewed certainty. “Please give him a chance to explain. This is his last opportunity to do so.”

"You explain it… on our way back to Philadelphia."

He shook his head. "Not my story to tell, miss."

Disgusted, she turned away and gazed longingly at the *Destiny* at anchor in the distance. She wished for a moment that she was back on the ship, feeling the spray of the ocean and hearing the snap of the sails. She wanted to go back to that night when stars filled the sky and the melody of Captain Sullivan's guitar floated across the deck and out into the dark ocean. Like the sails overhead, she'd embraced the Atlantic air and felt it fill her, felt it lift away her heartache. That one night of utter freedom had been the best night of her life.

That she wanted to return to that night rather than to her home surprised her. She did want to go home. But she would carry that special evening and the feeling of unfettered freedom with her for the rest of her life.

Just as she would carry the knowledge of her father's betrayal.

What could he possibly say to explain leaving her behind?

She released a hard sigh to ease the tightness in her chest. Whatever his excuse, she apparently needed to hear it before Captain Sullivan would take her home.

Still, she waited and watched the sun set, the shifting orange, pink, and purple colors of the evening sky slowly softening the edge of her anger. The repetitive hushhh of the surf washing the shore eased the tension in her shoulders. Finally able to draw a full breath, she turned toward the house she loved and the man she despised.

The sooner she heard her father's story, the sooner she could be on her way home.

But her father, the man who had betrayed her trust, was in bed when Captain Sullivan escorted her to the house. And so there was nothing to do but wait until morning.

Chapter Twelve

A portly woman named Letta with curly brown hair and kind eyes showed Grace to a lovely guest room on the second floor at the end of a wide hall. The room was dressed in soft greens and golds with thick pashmina wool carpets placed strategically on the dark hardwood floor. Tall arched windows with white shutters covered one wall of the room, and a set of double doors led to a small balcony off her room. Peering through the window into the twilight, she could make out the ocean and a long stretch of beach to her left, and to her right a boardwalk that led into a wooded area, all of which she wanted to explore.

That desire surprised her, and she immediately suppressed it. She wouldn't be here long enough to explore anything. Her plan was to talk with her father first thing in the morning and then have Captain Sullivan return her home posthaste. She would remind him of his promise when he returned with the items he'd gone to fetch from the *Destiny*.

While she waited for the captain's return, she explored the room, noting the expensive carpets, probably acquired by her father during his travels.

Near the fireplace, a round-topped table with a lamp, two books, and a painted vase filled with white hydrangeas sat between two mahogany chairs with decorative backs, deep seats, and thick cushions. A door at the far corner of the room led to a small private bath. The guest room was inviting and meant to offer a comfortable

stay to any guest. But she wasn't a guest. And she wasn't staying.

One night. One opportunity for her father to explain his betrayal. Then she was going back to her life and leaving him and her grief behind.

A firm knock on the door let her know the captain had returned.

He seemed to fill the doorway with his wide shoulders and commanding presence. His eyes were dark as caves, and she wondered what he hid in the shadowed depths. How did this man know her father? Why was he willing to risk prison to help him?

The captain offered her a small canvas satchel. "I brought the jar of lavender salve and bottle of rose oil you were using on the ship. You'll find another one of my clean shirts in there that should work as a nightshirt," he said, passing the satchel to her.

She'd made use of one of his shirts in that very manner while on the ship. Now he was sacrificing another for her.

He gazed down at her then, his dark eyes filled with apology. "I'm sorry you don't have your own accoutrements with you. I wish I could have brought you here under better conditions."

She could have taken the opening to singe his ears for dragging her here against her will, but she was too tired and heartsore. "I'm holding you to your promise to return me immediately after I speak with my father."

He nodded. "If that's still your wish, then yes."

It would be. Nothing her father could say would change her mind.

The captain glanced toward the closed balcony doors. "Shall I show you how to operate the shades and doors to keep your room comfortable?"

"Please," she said with a relieved exhale. The room was uncomfortably warm, and she was eager to make use of the balcony.

As the captain showed her how to work the shutters, she watched him from beneath her lashes, trying to disguise her interest in him. His bronzed forearms, roped with muscle, flexed as he

adjusted the shades. He had tied his long, dark hair back in his usual queue, but she remembered how it had looked that night on the deck of *Destiny*, when his hair was loose, and the wind lifted it like raven's wings.

He lowered his hand and faced her, catching her watching him. His expression turned curious, but he didn't question her keen interest. "If the wind should kick up and make it too cool through the night just close the doors and adjust the shutters on your open windows. If you close up everything, you'll likely find it stuffy in here again by morning."

As if he sensed her discomfort, he stepped outside onto the balcony, and she followed. To her left was another small balcony with doors that led into another room. She hoped it wasn't her father's room.

The captain pointed down the shadowed beach. "With the full moon tonight, the tide will be high and the moonlight bright. If you look to the northwest just after midnight, you'll be able to see the tide pool shimmering like liquid silver."

"Or you could see the ghost!" a young boy blurted from inside the room.

The sound startled Grace, but it brought a smile to the captain's face.

"Willy, come on out here and meet Miss Covington," the captain said.

A second later, a young boy with messy blond hair, dirty clothes, bare feet, and bright eyes stepped onto the balcony. With a wide smile, he executed a formal bow and said, "Welcome, Miss Covington."

The boy was such a surprise and such a cute little guy that Grace couldn't help returning his funny introduction. Executing a playful curtsy, she thanked him and asked about the ghost.

Willy's eyes rounded and his mouth opened, but before he could utter a word, Captain Sullivan slipped his hand over the boy's mouth and playfully hauled him from the balcony and across the

room. He deposited the boy in the hall and told him it was bedtime and to let Miss Covington settle in.

"Yessir," Willy said, a bit crestfallen. But he cast another smile at Grace, who had followed them to the door, and told her he would share the story tomorrow. Then he told her to yell if she heard any scary noises, and they would come running. Then he added that his room was just across the hall from hers and that Captain Sullivan would be right next door to her.

Ah, that meant the neighboring balcony connected to the captain's room…

All that information and boyish energy left her thoughts awhirl.

The captain asked if she needed anything else, and when she declined, he excused himself and headed downstairs.

For a long while after he left, Grace stood on the balcony and unwound her thoughts like rope from a spool—around and around and around as she yanked and dragged and pulled on the line that tied her to her father. At one time that rope had been so tightly woven together nothing could have snapped it. Now there was nothing left but a dangling frayed end.

And bittersweet memories.

And so much pain.

She was furious with Captain Sullivan for ripping her from her life and thrusting her into this nightmare. But the lost girl in her, the one who refused to be silenced, insisted that he had given her the gift she'd prayed for, begged for, dreamed of even when she'd known it was impossible.

Despite being abandoned, betrayed, and forgotten by her father, her childhood love for the man bled through her anger. Her father was alive.

Exhausted by her thoughts and fluctuating emotions, she left the balcony and prepared for bed. She carried the satchel to the small private bath where she washed up and then donned the captain's shirt. He'd also tucked his night-robe that she'd been using inside the bag. She pulled it on and was swallowed in yards of soft flannel

and the scent of cedar and… Captain Sullivan. For a moment, it felt as if he'd drawn her into his strong arms to comfort her. And for a moment, she wished it were true.

It would be exhilarating—and dangerous—to be swept into the captain's strong arms. And foolish. She was engaged, and the captain was a criminal who had taken her against her will. But he hadn't harmed her. And he'd promised to return her home. Did that make him a criminal? Or an honorable man keeping his promise to her father and to her? Or an honorable criminal?

Gracious! Her thoughts were spinning like a windmill in a tempest.

Forcefully, she steered her thoughts away from certain trouble. Using the basin and scented soap, she washed the bodice and undergarments she'd been wearing for three days and hung them over the balcony railing to dry.

After returning inside, she sank into the deep cushioned chair and exhaled a long, weary sigh. Not once in her life had she believed she would experience such a day.

The sound of Captain Sullivan walking across the floor of his room next door drew her thoughts right back to him. It felt intimate to hear him through the wall while she was wrapped in his night-robe. Was he preparing for bed? She'd just spent three nights sleeping in his cabin, in his bed, and yet this moment felt more intimate. Perhaps her emotions were too raw, her heart too exposed, for her to think clearly on any matter. Despite the captain's part in bringing her here, she was suddenly glad for his strong presence. He had saved her life. Of that she had no doubt. If not for him, she would be at the bottom of the Schuylkill River. The captain's strong hands had rescued her then, and would hopefully give her someone to hold onto tomorrow when she faced her father.

Heartsore and confused and exhausted beyond words, she made her way to the bed, slipped beneath the covers, and let the sounds of the ocean and footsteps in the next bedroom lull her to sleep.

GRACE AWAKENED LATE in the night to the whine of the wind and the spill of bright moonbeams illuminating her room.

For a long moment, her thoughts spun, the unfamiliar setting confusing her. She wasn't in her bedroom...

She was on a ship… Captain Sullivan's ship.

But she wasn't on that ship now.

She was on land. In a room she didn't recognize. An instant later, clarity swept into her thoughts like a gust of wind. She was on Indigo Isle.

In her father's house.

With a flick of her arm, she tossed aside the covers and sat up. When her feet hit the floor, they sank into the plush carpet beside her bed, a pashmina carpet.

The tortured, deeply disturbing sound of the wind traveled into her room. But as she reached for the captain's night-robe, she realized that the moaning sound wasn't from the wind rattling her shutters. It was the sound of a man in pain. And she knew that man was her father.

Was his nurse with him?

Grace crossed to her bedroom door and listened for a few moments to see if someone was tending to him.

She heard nothing but his low moan. It came from deep in his throat and through gritted teeth as if he were fighting to keep it inside. Realizing that he was in terrible agony flooded her with remorse—and fear.

Exiting her room, she followed the wide hallway past the bedroom door where the captain was staying. The next door beyond the captain's room was open a few inches, and soft light spilled into the hallway. She paused, realizing that her father was talking with someone. The voice that responded belonged to Captain Sullivan. That surprised her. She would have expected her father's caretaker, Letta, who slept just down the hall, to be with him. But the soothing

voice belonged to the man who had turned Grace's life upside down.

A long sigh of what sounded like relief reached her ears.

"Thank you, son," her father said, his voice graveled but less strained. "Without this medicine, I couldn't have held on for her."

"I know, Thomas. But she's here now."

Grace leaned against the wall, her ear toward the open door. They were talking about her.

"How did you convince my daughter to come with you?" her father asked.

"I didn't convince her."

"Then how is she here?" Her father sounded confused, and she wondered if it was a result of the medicine he'd apparently taken.

"You wouldn't believe it if I told you."

"I might. My Gracie was a precocious, high-spirited child. I hope she didn't lose that passion and vivacity."

Captain Sullivan's soft chuckle slipped through the door and wrapped her in its warmth. "She is every bit the vivacious young lady you remember, Thomas."

"That pleases me. She was such a delight as a child. I've missed so much. Tell me about her."

The longing and heartbreak in her father's voice surprised her—and made her want to go to him and ask how he could have abandoned a daughter he seemed to have loved. But his voice was weary, and she knew this wasn't the time for their talk. So she leaned against the wall and listened to the captain tell her father about her and their journey to Indigo Isle. He said she was spirited and intelligent and seemed right at home on the *Destiny*. He talked about her refusal to stay in the cabin where she would be protected from the wind and sun, and how she took to the deck like a seasoned sailor.

Her father's quiet laugh of delight shook her. She'd missed that laugh so desperately.

"Your daughter inherited your love of the sea, Thomas," the

captain continued. “She quizzed me endlessly about the stars and how one might navigate by them, and then she wanted to see my maps and charts and navigating instruments. She insisted on knowing how *Destiny*’s sails work and why we use different types of rope for rigging and—” The captain released a laugh. “She didn’t give me or the crew a moment’s peace the entire trip.”

“That’s my inquisitive, headstrong Gracie,” her father said, his voice overflowing with pride. “Did she seem happy at Fairview?”

A slash of anxiety cut through Grace. She needed to get home to her grandfather and find a way to save her reputation—and her engagement to Devon—and Captain Sullivan’s neck from the noose her grandfather would tighten without mercy.

The captain admitted that he hadn’t been to Fairview and that he’d encountered Grace at the inn. He explained some of what had transpired there although he didn’t share all the details of that night, their time together in the river or how he’d tended Grace onboard his ship. But he’d said enough to elicit questions from her father.

“Are you saying you took Grace without her permission?” her father asked, his voice riddled with concern and fatigue. “When you said you would find a way to bring her here, I never expected you would abduct her.”

“She wasn’t in a position to give her permission at the time,” the captain replied.

A hard sigh sounded in the room, presumably from her father. “I’m afraid you have just put a target on your back, son. If Joseph Fairview discovers you’re behind Grace’s disappearance, there isn’t a place on this earth you can hide.”

“I’m not hiding, Thomas. I know what I’ve done. I promised to return Grace to Fairview after you talk with her. That’s what I intend to do.”

“You can’t, son. Listen to me. Please,” her father said, his voice tight. From pain? From concern? “He’ll have you hauled off to the darkest prison where you’ll rot.”

Grace's stomach knotted with dread. Her father was right. And though Captain Sullivan deserved to be jailed for abducting her, the thought of it turned her stomach.

"I knew that was a possibility," the captain said. "But that's not for you to worry about. You need to sleep, Thomas. You're going to need your strength tomorrow."

"Did you say Grace was with Saul when you found her?" her father asked.

"She was," the captain said.

"How is the boy?" her father asked, his voice softened by memories and perhaps a sleeping tonic.

After a slight hesitation, the captain said, "He's a giant of a man, and he seems dedicated to your daughter."

"That's good," her father said, the news seeming to please him. "They were inseparable as children. I'm glad to hear they have maintained their friendship."

Grace bit her lip. She and Saul were more than friends. They were family. And Saul might be a giant of a man, but he was still a boy at heart… and in his mind. She didn't want her father to know that. Why she wanted to protect him from that knowledge, she couldn't say exactly, but it was enough to galvanize her into action.

As she spun toward her father's door with the intent of interrupting the conversation, a loud banging from the other end of the hall startled her. She froze and squinted down the darkened hallway, hoping it wasn't Willy's ghost making an appearance.

Light spilled into the hall as Captain Sullivan stepped out of the bedroom, apparently seeking the source of the commotion.

Their eyes met, his dark and alert… and then surprised.

Heat scorched her face to be caught eavesdropping and prowling the house in her men's nightclothes.

The banging continued, coming from the direction of her room.

"I believe your shutters need to be adjusted," he said, the surprise in his eyes settling into appreciation as he took her in from her burning cheeks to her bare ankles and feet. Without a word, he

headed to her room.

She followed in silence, her mind awhirl. She was half angry that he'd shared so much about her with her father, and half moved by how he'd described her in such intimate detail.

The shutters in her room were open and banging against the wall. The captain strode across the floor and closed and latched the shutters, leaving the slats adjusted to allow moonlight to slip into her room.

Grace, still clutching her borrowed robe tight about her, faced him squarely despite her state of undress. "Captain Sullivan, I appreciate your assistance with the shutters, but I do not appreciate you telling my father about me. If he is to know any details of my life, I'll be the one to share them."

Rather than excusing himself and leaving the room as he should have done, the captain braced one strong hand on the back of a chair and looked at her long and hard. His face was chiseled by shadows and moonlight, so intriguing and handsome it left her breathless. "There is nothing more I could tell him about you because that's all I know," he said, his voice quiet, almost seductive in the night. Slowly, his lips quirked up on one side as his eyes drank her in. To her shock, he stroked his hand down the length of her braid where it draped over her shoulder and the front of her robe—his robe. "You look as if you've been kissed by a moonbeam," he said, his voice low and lazy, as if he were in no hurry to leave.

Flooded by his manly presence, she stood in stunned silence. His nearness made her skin tingle and her stomach swirl and her breathing shallow.

This man, with his too-handsome face and quiet words, was dangerous.

He shouldn't be in her room.

He shouldn't make her feel so... so wildly alive.

But he did.

His eyes seemed to command her, making her head swim and her body sway toward him as her world tilted. Catching her in his

strong arms was simply the act of a gentleman, but the unexpected contact left her stunned and unable to pull away.

"Grace…," he whispered, his breath a warm caress across her forehead.

The sound of her name sighing from his lips made the room spin. She lurched sideways to break his embrace, and clutched the corner post of her bed canopy to steady herself. "Y-you should leave."

"I should," he said, his hand gently cupping her elbow as if to help her stay on her feet. But he didn't leave. For a long moment they looked at each other as if deciding whether they would become more than acquaintances, more than captor and captive. Finally, he released her arm and saved her from making a dire mistake. "If there is anything you wish to share with your father or any questions you want to ask of him, you had better do so very soon."

She heard him but her thoughts were still reeling.

"You know he's dying, don't you?"

His words—and the ugly reality of them—shocked her back to her senses as if she'd been doused in ice water. She gasped and stepped away from him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I hadn't meant to be blunt or inconsiderate. But Grace, you don't have time to be angry with him."

"I understand but it doesn't assuage my outrage," she said. Having heard her father in excruciating pain, knowing with certainty that he really was dying, that he could slip away at any minute left her heartbroken and frightened, almost panicked that he'd be gone before morning. "Why did he wait until he was on his deathbed to contact me?" she asked, her voice low and filled with heat. "It's cruel and unfair and utterly heartbreaking to discover that he had knowingly abandoned me. And now he is going to die —" Her voice broke and she struggled for a moment before she could go on. "To go through this wrenching pain again is

unbearable. Why couldn't he have just let me go on believing he was dead?"

"Because he loves you and wants you to know that. Try not to be too hard on him."

"What am I supposed to say to him? How can he expect me to feel anything but betrayed and hurt?" she asked, exasperated. "You cannot possibly understand what I'm feeling to have learned that my father abandoned me. I was a little girl. He left a huge, aching hole inside of me." She pressed a fist to her chest. "You have no idea what a father's betrayal feels like."

For an intense moment, he gazed down at her, the warmth in his eyes turning to cold ash. "Unfortunately, I do," he said, and with that, he spun on his heel and left her alone in her room.

ABANDONMENT. Such a cold, hard word, and one that Leo knew only too well.

A word he didn't want to think about. A time of his life he didn't want to remember.

Striding across the sandy beach, leaving a trail of angry footprints behind him, he tried to outpace memories that refused to be left behind. He'd been carrying those memories like a heavy yoke across his shoulders every day of his life. They weighed him down. Made him ache. Chafed his heart and mind until he was raw.

Yes, he knew what it felt like to be abandoned.

And abused.

And filled with regret.

His father had been an abusive liar, an angry, vindictive man without integrity. To be abandoned by a man like that had hurt… but it had also been a relief.

To be abandoned by a kind and decent man like Thomas, a man who was once Grace's entire world, would be devastating.

Remembering the shock on her face when she'd first seen

Thomas still wrung Leo's heart. He'd seen how her eyes argued with her brain, how her shock dissolved into joy and longing, only to be slowly consumed by the swelling flames of her outrage and anger. He'd felt the changes in her as he'd gripped her arm to keep her on her feet when she sagged with disbelief. He'd felt her body stiffen and grow rigid with fury, felt her tremble as her heart splintered.

Knowing he was responsible for thrusting her into that painful moment cut him to the bone. He hadn't wanted to hurt her. He'd hoped the reunion, however shocking, would have brought her great joy. But he'd been wrong.

Again.

He shook his head, disgusted with himself. When would he learn? His actions, however well intended, had only brought others pain.

Night wrapped around him, the stars overhead paling in the glow of a full moon, the ocean a vast darkness with wide streams of silver moonlight shimmering on the surface. He should have felt calmed by the soft night air and the silent beach, but anguish and regret and heart-wrenching loss churned in his gut. He blamed his father for all of it, and rightly so, but the hard truth of the matter was that Leo himself was responsible for shattering his family.

He'd caused so much destruction.

So much pain.

And none of it could be undone. He knew that. And yet, he had to try to make amends. He'd made a promise to his siblings, and if it took until his dying breath, he intended to keep that promise.

But it seemed his life was filled with obligations that continually derailed his plans and stacked days upon weeks upon months of delays that made him feel caged and half wild with the need to hunt—for his lost siblings… for redemption… for peace.

Now there was Grace to consider. He owed her the time she had left with her father. Even if that meant delaying his own journey. Again. Even if it meant facing prison in the end.

Releasing a long, tired sigh, he turned back toward the house

that he'd left far behind and the woman he'd unintentionally wounded and the man he couldn't bear to lose.

Chapter Thirteen



Morning sunlight streamed into Grace's room as she washed and groomed herself quickly, then pulled on her dress. Cramming the captain's nightclothes back in the satchel, she left the bag on one of the chairs and then hurried downstairs to find him. The captain had promised to take her home after her talk with her father, and she wanted to assure herself that he would uphold that promise.

As she stepped outside into a warm morning filled with sunlight and birdsong, she found her father propped up in one corner of a wide cushioned chair at the far end of the porch. Surprise and trepidation and a tumult of emotion washed through her. His eyes were filled with love and regret and heartbreak. He appeared decades older but the same in so many small ways. He was frighteningly thin with a gray pallor to his skin—skin that used to be healthy and bronzed by the sun—that underscored his ill health.

The truth of Captain Sullivan's warning was undeniable. Her father was terribly ill.

Her stomach did a sickening flip.

He was dying…

"Gracie…" he said, letting her name trail away. "We need to talk."

She remained by the door, the need to rush into the arms of her father, to hear his explanation warred with her need to lash out at him for deserting her.

He sighed. “I’m nearly out of time and there are things I need—I must tell you. Important things you need to know. I don’t have the strength to be out of bed for long so please come sit with me.”

She was too choked by heartache and anger to speak, so she remained silent and crossed the porch. Her roiling emotions wouldn’t allow her to sit. Instead she stood gripping the railing with one hand, needing something to hold onto in the coming storm.

Meeting her father’s eyes was her undoing. Before she could stop herself, words tumbled from her mouth. “How could you abandon me, Papa?” she asked, her voice so wracked with emotion she could only whisper. “I planted flowers at your grave and talked to you every visit. All this time I’ve been grieving for you, and you were here living in a home that you and mama and I used to dream about.”

“I bought this house for you and your mother, sweeting. This is where I planned to take you when… the day that—” His mouth snapped shut and his chin quivered. A long silence ensued while he wrestled his composure back in place. Finally, he released a shaky sigh. “After the accident, I was so hollowed out I could barely breathe. I couldn’t think or feel anything but rage and regret. I knew I needed to pull myself together for your sake, but I couldn’t do it at Fairview. I was broken, sweetheart. That’s why I left. I needed some time on the ocean to clear my head and heal my heart… so I could be the father you needed me to be.”

“Then why didn’t you come back to get me and bring me here? Why didn’t you want me?” she asked, biting her lip, struggling to hold herself together.

Moisture beaded on his lower eyelids. “I didn’t abandon you, Grace. I couldn’t come back because… because I was in prison.”

“What?” she asked, sagging back against the railing. Of all the excuses she’d expected to hear, this wasn’t even a consideration. Her father in prison? It was unthinkable.

Regret and pain washed across his face. “I made a terrible mistake that cost people their lives. I used poor judgement and

deserved the sentence I was given."

"Why didn't you write to us? Grandfather would have taken me to visit you. Maybe he could have gotten you out of prison."

"No," her father said, that one word holding an ocean of meaning that was lost on her.

"You could have at least let us know you were alive. We thought you were dead."

He didn't reply for several long seconds, as if he were trying to decide what to say. She watched the shifting emotions in his eyes, hurt, anger, regret, and finally surrender. "Prisoners weren't allowed to correspond with the outside world." His nostrils flared and anger sparked his eyes. "I wanted to see you, Grace, believe me. But I wasn't allowed to do so," he said, his clipped tone suggesting a rage he was struggling to contain.

"How long were you in prison?" she asked.

"Two years the first time." His jaw tensed. "Five months the second time."

Staggered by his confession, she stood mute, calculating in her mind. Of the twelve years since her mother's death, since he'd disappeared, he'd been imprisoned for less than three years and a free man the other nine. Nine years they could have spent together. "Are you saying that I could have lived here with you after you got out of prison? And you didn't bother to come back for me?"

He lifted his hand to stop her. "I was deathly ill after I was released the first time, and mostly bedridden for months." Anger flashed in his eyes, and his mouth opened as if he wanted to tear someone apart, then he snapped his jaw closed so hard his teeth clicked together. He struggled to get his breath back, and once he did, he said, "When I improved enough to get out of bed, I intended to come get you, but I was sent back to prison."

"Why…?"

He gazed at her with world weary eyes. "Because I tried to fight a battle I couldn't win." He lowered his gaze and shook his head. "I'm so sorry I hurt you."

She stared at him, waiting for him to give her an explanation she could understand and accept. But he sat crumpled in his chair, a man without answers.

Her thoughts turned inward for several seconds as she tried to piece together his story and what he wasn't saying. But gaps the size of an ocean left her confused and searching for a truth she knew she wasn't receiving. "Papa, I understand how being in prison could have kept you away for those years," she said, "but you threw away nine years that we could have been together." Unable to fathom abandoning a child, she stared accusingly at the man who had done just that. "How could you do it?"

Another surge of moisture beaded up in his eyes. He blinked and looked beyond her to the shore where Willy and Captain Sullivan were walking. For a moment, she watched them too, trying to swallow the hard lump of pain in her throat as the boy and the captain approached.

"Grace," her father said, drawing her attention back to him. "I wanted to come back for you. More than anything in the world. But I had a son to consider, and I couldn't risk losing him or putting him in danger."

The breath left Grace's body as if she'd been kicked in the belly. For several long moments silence reigned between them. The call of seagulls along the shore mingled with the sing-song chirping of rose-breasted grosbeak and whistling of orioles living in the wooded area near the house. Morning sunshine splashed across the porch and draped her shoulders with a yellow blanket of warmth—and yet she had never felt so cold. Not even when she was sinking into the frigid depths of the Schuylkill River.

This time it wasn't her hands and feet that were numb. It was her heart.

"So this is why you brought me here…" She released a half-laugh filled with pain.

"Willy is your half-brother. I thought you would want to know him."

She glanced at the skinny urchin combing the beach, then turned cold eyes on her father.

"How old is Willy?"

"Nine as of last October."

"Where is his mother?"

"She died in childbirth."

A deep pang of sympathy for the boy cut through Grace. She understood too well how awful it was to grow up without a mother. Still, the thought of her father with another woman, a woman who wasn't her mother, grated. "Did you love her? Willy's mother?"

Her father seemed to think about it for a moment. "Yes. She was a dear friend. But your mother was the love of my life."

To think that her father had been living here with another woman and then with a son nearly turned Grace inside out. She felt raw and ready to come apart bone by bone. He'd found a new family and left his old family behind. He'd chosen his son over his daughter…

"Does Willy know about me?" she asked, forcing the words from her raw throat.

"I'm going to tell him this morning." He met her scowl with pleading eyes. "I'm out of time, Grace. He needs to know, and I need to be the one to tell him."

Reluctantly, she gave a nod of acceptance. Her outrage wasn't with the boy.

"Gracie?" His jaw quivered and his voice was filled with agony. "I swear I would have come back for you if I could have."

She believed him. The pain in his eyes was real. But he wasn't telling her why he couldn't come back for her. He was leaving out big parts of the story that she needed to know.

But before she could demand answers, Willy's footsteps thundered up the porch steps and interrupted their conversation.

"Look at the shells we found," Willy said, thrusting his sandy hands out, palms up, to show Grace and her—*their*—father his treasures. This skinny boy with wild hair and big eyes and a

boisterous personality was her little brother.

And her father had chosen him.

Not Grace.

Despite the brutal stab to her heart, she felt only tenderness for the boy.

"Come sit with me, son," their father said, patting the empty space on the seat cushion beside him.

Willy bounded up like an adoring dog perching beside its master. "I got these for you, Papa. I know you miss walking the beach with me, so I picked up shells for both of us."

The smile on her father's face stole Grace's breath. He'd looked at her like that once, his eyes filled with love and tenderness and a promise to be her safe harbor forever.

"Thank you, son," he said, his voice wobbly and weak.

He exchanged a glance with Captain Sullivan who took a seat opposite Grace where she still leaned against the railing. Her legs were trembling so badly that she couldn't have made it to a chair without collapsing. So she stood her ground and waited for her father to break the news to Willy.

"Cap'n Sullivan said he'll take me out to his ship today if you say I can go," Willy said, his eyes lit with excitement.

Another look passed between her father and the captain. "Of course, Willy. But I need to talk with you first."

"'bout what?" Willy asked, absorbed in examining his shells.

"Well, what would you think about having a sister?"

Willy scrunched his nose and shrugged. "I guess that'd be all right." He looked up. "Would she be a baby?"

Their father slowly shook his head. "No, son. She'd be a grown beautiful woman like Grace."

Willy snickered. "I'd rather have a sister who can hunt shells with me."

"Why can't a grown sister hunt for shells with you?" he asked. "Captain Sullivan spent the morning with you doing just that."

Willy seemed to consider that for a moment. "I suppose."

“It might be nice to have a woman around, Willy. Someone who could tuck you in bed at night, now that I can’t do it anymore,” their father said, casting a sidelong glance at Grace.

Tuck him in bed? Like a mother would? The idea of mothering a sweet boy like Willy tugged at Grace’s heart. The boy would need someone to care for him after their father… after he… she forcefully steered away from the inevitable loss she and Willy would soon share.

“Son,” her father said, gently sweeping Willy’s wind-whipped hair off his forehead and garnering the boy’s full attention. “Grace is your sister.”

Willy’s expression of curiosity and semi-disbelief made Grace hold her breath. Surprisingly, it mattered to her what Willy thought. He turned to look at her, his blue eyes filled with questions. “You’re my sister?” he asked in breathless wonder.

Her fingers clenched around the railing. “I am.”

He swung his attention back to their father. “How did I get a sister?”

To Grace’s surprise, her father drew Willy against him, and using his storytelling voice—the same voice he’d used when he would spin tales for Grace—he began to explain a situation that seemed impossible to explain.

“When I was a young man,” he said, “I had a wife and daughter I loved very much.” His gaze, weary and filled with apology, rested on Grace for a moment. “My daughter was a lot like you, Willy.”

“She was?” he asked, appearing to be delighted at the prospect.

“Yes, son. My little girl was bright and beautiful and wildly curious. She loved taking walks and climbing trees and spinning tales about the grand adventures she would one day have. When she set her mind to something, she would stand her ground like a warrior.” A small chuckle rumbled through her father’s chest. “She was the light of my life, Willy. It broke my heart every time I had to leave her.”

“Why did you leave her?” Willy asked, verbalizing the question

that kept circling Grace's mind.

Sadness washed her father's face. "I was a sailor and a driven young man who put prosperity before common sense. I overestimated my abilities and made the biggest mistake of my life. My actions brought pain and loss to the ones I loved most. I had to pay for my mistakes and was unable to return to my little girl."

He didn't add that he'd gone to prison, and Grace was relieved he didn't share that with the innocent boy.

"By the time I was able to go home," he continued, "a terrible sickness consumed me, the same sickness that is upon me now, Willy. I came here to Indigo Isle to get healthy again so I could take care of my daughter."

"Couldn't her mother take care of her?" Willy asked.

Her father's mouth trembled. "Her mother had died."

"Oh…." Willy shifted his gaze to Grace. "That's sad."

She nodded because she couldn't force a word from her tight throat.

"For months, I didn't know one day from the next," her father said, continuing his story. "When I finally got out of bed, I was weak as a kitten. During my long recovery, I grew fond of the woman who took care of me and kept me company and kept me sane," he said, glancing at Grace, then exchanging a look with the captain who seemed to be there to support all of them. "That woman was your mother."

Willy hung on every word, mesmerized by the tale. "She was?"

"Yes, it seemed I was to become a father again… to you," their father said, stroking Willy's hair as he continued his story. His tenderness and love for Willy was painfully, beautifully obvious, and in that moment Grace recognized the father she had once known and adored. It moved her deeply, hurt her, made her envious, and broke her open.

"But my mother died," Willy said, "and so I just have you."

Their father's lips compressed, and for a moment he said nothing. Releasing a shaky breath, he chucked Willy beneath the

chin. “Not anymore, son. Now you have a sister.”

Willy’s gaze shifted between Grace and their father, then he asked, “Are older sisters like mothers?”

Her eyes met her father’s, his deep pools of desperate hope. He was lost and without an answer. It was up to Grace to decide if she would take care of her little brother after their father died.

Her gaze settled on Willy, tucked against their father’s side, his shells resting on the seat cushion, his knobby knees speckled with sand, his blue eyes gazing back at her.

Regardless of how hurt she was by her father, she felt protective of the boy. “Sisters can be like mothers,” she said to Willy, knowing her father couldn’t speak for her because it was a question only she could answer.

A grin split Willy’s face, his pleasure so effervescent that Grace found herself completely swept away by the darling boy.

“Want to go see the *Destiny* with me and the Cap’n today?” Willy asked.

What she really wanted was to turn back time, to be picnicking with her parents on a warm summer day when she believed her father would always be her safe harbor during the storms in her life. But she was here in the middle of the most disorienting tempest of her life, and she was the safe harbor for her father—and his son… her little brother.

The captain stood and ruffled Willy’s hair. “This adventure is just for men.” He winked at Grace. “Sorry, Miss Covington, but Willy and I need to make this trip alone.”

While she feigned disappointment, she tried to convey her gratitude to the captain with a slight nod. She needed more time alone with her father.

“Before you boys head out, will you see me back to my room?” her father asked. He looked utterly exhausted and barely able to hold his head up.

“Of course,” the captain said. “Willy, will you open the doors for us?”

Willy shot off the seat, his bare feet pounding across the porch floor as he made a beeline for the door.

Without a moment's hesitation, Grace moved to assist her father. She and the captain drew her father to his feet and supported him on either side as he stumbled and wobbled his way to the door. Willy held it open as they made their way inside. It was a slow trek from the door to the stairway, but her father insisted he could make the climb. Grace thought the captain should carry her father up the stairs, but before she could suggest it, Captain Sullivan met her eyes and gave a slight shake of his head as if to caution her to let them handle it. So she remained silent while they made their way step by painful step up the stairs and down the hall to her father's room. Willy sprinted ahead and opened the bedroom door. Then he shot back down the stairs and out the front door, presumably to play with his shells on the porch.

Her father was trembling so badly by the time they settled him in bed that his teeth were chattering.

And Grace was shaking. This emaciated man couldn't be her strapping seafaring father who'd carried her on his shoulders and lifted her mother off her feet while dancing her across their picnic blanket. That man had been full of life and laughter. His skin had been bronzed by the sun, and his eyes had been kissed by the stars. He'd captained a ship, commanded a crew, and crossed an ocean. That was the father she remembered.

"Gracie…" Her father's eyes were closed, but he lifted a trembling hand as if searching for her.

She reached back, clasping his cold, bony fingers in her warm hand.

"Thank you," he whispered. A hard puff of breath left his mouth and his hand went limp. Those two words and the act of lifting his arm seemed to have sapped the last of his strength. He lay with his mouth open in his hollowed-out face. His eyes, although closed, seemed sunken and overlarge.

"I can stay with your father and have Fogg take Willy out to the

Destiny," the captain said quietly.

It would be a comfort to have the captain, who seemed to know how to tend her father, nearby, but Grace declined. "Willy deserves some time away from… this."

"He does," the captain said. "Willy's a good boy, you know."

She could see that, but there was more underlying the captain's words. He was protective of the boy. He cared about Willy. He wanted Grace to know that.

Unflinching, she met the captain's eyes. "He's my brother, Captain. I'll take care of him when… when it's time."

His eyes searched hers as if trying to determine her sincerity. Then he gave a slow nod as if she'd passed his inspection.

"Would you please send Letta up before you go?" she asked, turning her attention to tucking the quilt around her father's thin body. Her hands shook and her stomach churned, and her thoughts swirled with dizzying speed. Her father was going to die.

He was going to die.

She bit her lip, holding back a flood of emotion as the captain left the room.

Alone with her father for the first time in twelve years, Grace sat beside him on the bed, laid her head on his shrunken chest, and allowed the young girl in her to hug the father she'd so desperately loved and missed.

Chapter Fourteen



Grace's father had dropped into a deep, unreachable place that terrified her. Letta said he was simply exhausted from overexerting himself the previous day—when he'd told Grace about Willy being her brother—and that he would likely continue to sleep long into the evening.

Grace worried aloud that her father wasn't just in a deep resting state but that he was in his final hours.

"He needs to rest is all," Letta said, shooing Grace from the room, saying she would look after Willy and insisting that Grace go with the captain to Charleston for the day.

Apparently the captain had pressing business in Charleston and would be departing shortly. Grace didn't want to leave her father. They were almost out of time. She knew that as surely as she knew she would never stop loving him. But it was apparent that her father wouldn't wake any time soon. Until then, there was nothing she could do for him, and no answers he could give her. And so she hurried outside hoping the captain hadn't left already. The thought of standing on *Destiny*'s deck again, feeling the wind in her hair and the sun on her face, was so enticing that she fairly ached for a few hours of relief.

"Captain Sullivan!" she called, raising her voice above the soft roar of the ocean washing the shore.

The captain turned back, surprise registering on his face as his eyes met hers.

“I’d like to go with you today,” she said, striding purposefully toward him.

He cocked his head as if he weren’t certain he’d heard her correctly.

When she was close enough to not have to shout, she said, “I would like to go with you today.”

“You would?” he asked, obviously surprised.

“Yes. I want to call my grandfather and let him know I’m alive and unharmed. I can only imagine how distraught he is over my disappearance.”

The disapproval that flooded the captain’s eyes flattened her. That she had hoped he might enjoy her company left her face burning with embarrassment and indignation.

Hands on her hips, she faced him squarely. “Not only would I like to make that call, but I have been wearing the same clothes since you hauled me aboard your ship, Captain. I need to purchase suitable clothing and… other items.”

Mortification seemed to wash across his face. “Of course, Miss Covington. I apologize for not considering your needs sooner.”

“Then you’ll take me with you?”

“I will,” he said, but he didn’t move toward the rowboat waiting just a few feet away. His mouth opened, then closed. He sighed and raked his fingers through his dark hair that was wonderfully windblown and tangled in the collar of his crisp white shirt. As she admired the man, she found herself snared in his dark-eyed gaze. “May I make a request of you, Miss Covington?”

His covert tone made her uneasy. “Perhaps,” she said cautiously, uncertain if she was walking into a trap of some sort.

“May I ask that you not call your grandfather just yet?” He held up a hand to stop her rebuttal. “I know what I’m asking of you is terribly unfair to you and unintentionally cruel to your family who is undoubtedly worried sick about you. But if you call your grandfather, he will have me jailed immediately. I know I deserve it for hauling you off without your permission, and I’m willing to

make restitution or pay the price for my decision, but I'm asking this kindness of you just the same. Will you allow me a small grace period so I can try to find my brother Gray and my sister, River, first? I… I haven't seen them since we were children."

His request shocked her and left her deeply curious about him. To honor his request would thrust her into a terrible predicament. How could she knowingly let her grandfather suffer when she could easily put his mind at ease? Even considering it nauseated her. She couldn't be that cruel, especially not intentionally.

And yet, the desperation she saw in the captain's eyes and heard in his imploring request tugged at her heart. He was a man in pain. She could see it now, that tortured soul hidden in the depths of his dark eyes. This tall, strapping man who seemed so strong and in command was broken.

"Regardless of your decision, Miss Covington, I'll take you to Charleston."

He could have refused to take her with him. But he wasn't threatening to leave her behind even knowing that she could destroy his life with one phone call. The captain hadn't once crossed the line of propriety with her, except perhaps that breathless moment in her room when he'd caught her in his arms to steady her, and then dared to touch her hair, but she'd been as responsible for that breach of propriety as he'd been. No, Captain Sullivan was a man of fierce integrity who cared about her father and Willy, and had earned her consideration.

And the truth was that she didn't want to go back to Fairview yet. She needed to be with her father, to get answers, to bond with her little brother… and to learn more about the intriguing man standing before her with his boots planted firmly in the sand as he awaited her answer.

"All right, Captain, I'll give you the time you need."

His shoulders lowered in apparent relief.

"On one condition," she added.

His shoulders tensed again. "And that condition?"

“I want to know about your siblings and why you haven’t seen each other since you were children.”

For several long seconds, he seemed to consider her request, then gave a decisive nod and offered his arm. “Allow me to help you into the boat, Miss Covington.”

With their negotiations complete and their deal made, they shoved off and headed toward the *Destiny* anchored offshore, her sails trimmed as she awaited their arrival. The majesty of the schooner captivated Grace. She could understand how men were drawn to a seafaring life. If she’d been born a man, she could easily see herself choosing that life. That thought made her smile. She was her father’s daughter after all.

But he had a son now. A son who could follow in his footsteps as she could not.

The captain’s quiet chuckle drew her attention to him. “A lovely smile on your face turning into a frown,” he said, observing her closely. “Makes one wonder what thoughts are dancing through your mind.”

Thoughts she wouldn’t share with anyone. “I was thinking that I’m in a decidedly awkward and uncomfortable situation that forces me to ask something of you that I’d rather not ask.”

He raised one dark eyebrow. “I can’t imagine anything more awkward than what I just asked of you, Miss Covington.”

That comparison made her lips tilt in a half-smile. “Perhaps. But I’m afraid I must ask you for a loan, Captain Sull—”

“Call me Leo. Please,” he said, interrupting her.

Surprised by his request, she opened her mouth to respond, to tell him he was being too familiar, but it seemed smarter to ignore his request altogether. “I will repay the loan, of course. Upon my return to Fairview, I’ll have my grandfather settle with you.”

The captain laughed, his teeth flashing like pearls in the sunshine, his eyes lit with amusement. “I’m afraid your grandfather will repay me with a long prison sentence.”

Likely true, but better to avoid that subject for now, and so she

pursued her request. “I’m without funds to purchase the items I need. I would be grateful if you could loan me the necessary funds until I return home. I can assure you that I will make good on repaying you.”

Still grinning, still looking at her, he said, “Purchase whatever you need, Miss Covington. No loan necessary.” When she opened her mouth to argue, he shook his head. “I insist. I owe you much more than a wardrobe.”

Perhaps he did. But she owed him too. Until Captain Sullivan had swept her away from her overly protected life, she had never imagined the freedom of sailing an ocean nor would she have discovered that her beloved father was alive or that she had an adorable little brother. Nor would she have experienced the thrill of the captain’s touch or the look in his eyes that set her heart racing.

The arms of her fiancé were the arms of a friend. A dear friend for sure. But still… a friend. Now that she knew the difference, the arranged marriage awaiting her at home felt like her own prison sentence.

That thought startled and shamed her. Devon Kettering was a decent and very handsome man who deserved her allegiance. He was the kind of man and friend who would honor his commitment to marry her even if her sudden disappearance had ruined her reputation—a situation she’d been mulling over since waking in the captain’s cabin after her fall into the river. She’d considered a number of stories to explain her absence. Perhaps she could say she’d hurried off to the bedside of a sick friend or relative. But she had precious few of those, which made it too easy for her grandfather to discover her lie and for others to discredit her story. Plus, Saul had been so distraught over losing her in the storm that he’d run to her grandfather for help—and they’d gone straight to the Old Anchor Inn in search of her. Saul would have revealed where they’d been, and that Grace had gotten lost in the storm. There would have been a search party sent out to find her. They might have found scattered snow where she’d tumbled down the

riverbank and broken through the ice in the river. Would they think she had drowned? Would they have noticed the boot tracks in the snow and surmised she'd been rescued? Would it cross their mind that she'd been kidnapped? Or had the snowstorm covered all tracks, leaving no trail?

"Miss Covington, are you certain you want to travel today?" the captain asked, watching her closely.

Grateful to be pulled from the murky depths of her disturbing thoughts, she lifted her face to feel the warmth of the sun on her cheeks. "Honestly, Captain, I need to sail away from everything today." She leaned slightly to the side and trailed her fingertips in the water. "I would love nothing more than to spend the day as someone else." A glance at the captain's face made her want to slough off all the pain and troubles that plagued her and simply enjoy an adventure with her handsome escort.

"Who would you be?" he asked.

The question surprised her.

"If you could be someone else, who would you be?" he asked, rephrasing his question as if she hadn't understood.

She thought about that for a moment as her gaze roved the undulating ocean from the plunging boat oars to the far horizon. "I'd be the *Destiny*," she said.

Her comment seemed to surprise him… and please him. "I thought you'd choose to be a person, not a schooner."

She shrugged. "People and their lives are too complicated. I'd rather be a sleek, adventurous vessel with my sails catching the wind and my bow cutting the waves. I'd rather my storms in life were caused by Mother Nature than the people around me." Feeling a bit foolish for confessing such an odd thing, she grinned. "I bet you're sorry you asked."

He laughed. A nice laugh. A real laugh. A laugh of pleasure that warmed her from the center out.

"You should laugh more often," she said, the words tumbling out of her mouth before she could think to stop them.

Something earnest and intimate sparked in his eyes and they seemed to drink her in. As his bronzed hands came to a rest on his knees, the oars skimmed the surface of the water. “You are such an enigma,” he said quietly. “A mystery I can’t solve, and yet one that utterly fascinates me.”

In the ensuing silence, their gazes tangled like ocean grass, coming together, drifting away, and then back again as if moved by the underwater currents gently rocking their boat. The sound of seagulls overhead mingled with shouts from the crew preparing *Destiny* for their journey.

“I wish I could capture your image in this moment,” he said softly.

A wave of pleasure rolled through her, surprising her, thrilling her, and leaving her feeling a little woozy. Bracing her hands on the sides of the boat to steady herself, she gulped a breath of salty air and said, “T-teach me to row.” She had to do something to break the spell the captain was casting over her like a fishing net. “Please. I’d genuinely like to learn.”

As she’d expected, the captain arched one dark eyebrow. But what she hadn’t expected was for him to agree.

“You’ll have to move over here,” he said, scooting over and patting the open space beside him on the bench seat. “Don’t stand up. Just stay low, use the sides of the boat to steady yourself, and move slowly.”

She tried to do as he’d instructed, but negotiating a rocking boat while her head was still reeling was easier said than done. She wobbled. She rocked the boat. She squeaked in alarm as the boat dipped sharply to one side.

The captain leaned in the opposite direction to counter her error, then laughed and offered his hand. “Hold on and I’ll attempt to keep us both out of the Atlantic.”

Committed to her course of action, she accepted his assistance and nearly swooned again as his warm hand clasped hers. He braced his feet against the sides of the boat, told her to stay

centered and crouched, and then drew her close to his chest before he angled his body and deposited her on the bench seat beside him.

She was literally shaking by the time she was seated, and it wasn't just from wobbling her way across a rocking boat.

"All right," he said, passing the oar handles to her. "Grip them like this," he said, placing his left hand on the oar on his side of the boat, and slipping his right arm around her back to grip the oar on her side of the boat. Their hands were now side by side on each oar. She was tucked against his side, the heat of his body creating a tempest in her belly. "Left oar first," he said. Demonstrating, he lifted the paddle from the water, directed the end—where their hands were touching—forward, which moved the paddle end toward the back of the boat. He dropped the oar into the water and pulled the handle back toward them.

Water sloshed and the boat spun in a circular motion until she was looking at the schooner rather than the beach. The abrupt movement surprised her. "I thought we would go straight."

"You need to work both oars to go forward or backward, depending on which direction you move the oars through the water." He demonstrated the effect of using both oars by moving them backward and then forward. "Using just one oar makes the boat turn."

"May I try?" she asked, delighted by this new skill she'd never before attempted.

"Of course," he said, relinquishing the oars to her, and then leaning back to allow her room to navigate.

Remembering his instruction, she lifted both oars, much heavier than she'd anticipated, out of the water. Moving her hands forward, she shifted the paddle ends to the back. She dropped the paddles into the water and pulled. And pulled harder. The boat barely moved. "Gracious!" she exclaimed with a shocked laugh. "I had no idea this required so much strength. It looked so effortless when you and Fogg were rowing."

The captain's warm laughter rolled over her. "It does require a

bit of work, but when one is used to the task it comes easy."

"For a grown man who is unfairly strong," she quipped, giving the oars another hard pull. "It feels as if I'm trying to paddle through sand."

"Shall I take the oars?" he asked, sounding as if he were choking back laughter.

"Not a chance. I want to row us the rest of the way to the *Destiny*."

His hoot of laughter rocked the boat. "Then you'll need to reverse the direction you're rowing. Or turn the boat around. Because we're headed toward shore."

"What?" She glanced behind her, and sure enough, they were inland. Confused, she turned to the captain who was sitting so close that her nose nearly collided with his chin. She reared back and gripped the oars to keep from falling off the seat that was now rocking from her abrupt movement. "H-how do I go that way?" she asked, gesturing with a tilt of her head toward the schooner.

"Either turn the boat around, or reverse the direction of the oars. Like this," he said, assisting her again, his arm brushing her back, his hands touching hers. Dropping the paddles into the water so her hands were now pushing instead of pulling the oars, caused the boat to head back toward the schooner.

"Argh! Pushing the oars is even more difficult than pulling them. How do you do this?"

His grin was so charming, so full of teasing warmth, that she could have sworn she had a school of minnows swimming in her belly.

"Would you like me to take the oars now?"

"No," she said, answering his smile with her own. "I would like you to help me turn this boat around."

His answering chuckle and swift tug on one oar spun the boat around, spun her heart around, left her dizzy and breathless. "You may command the oars now, Miss Covington."

She could barely command herself, but working the oars,

however difficult, allowed her to focus on something other than the captain's immediate proximity. But no matter how she moved it brought her rowing arm against his muscled chest. "Perhaps you should move to another seat," she suggested.

"I suspect I'd be moving back in a couple of minutes," he said, grinning down at her.

"You think I'm going to quit, don't you?"

"It's still a good distance to *Destiny*."

She lifted her chin. "Your point being?"

"Your arms aren't used to rowing."

"Perhaps not, but I'm getting the hang of this now." After a couple of hard strokes that did little to move them toward their destination, she asked, "How did you come to captain your own ship?"

"I help build schooners and other vessels at Crane and Grayson Shipbuilding in Crane Landing."

"In Maine, yes? Fogg mentioned the name," she said.

"That's right. Southern Maine, to be exact," he said. "I've lived there for several years now. "That's where I found *Destiny*. One of our customers had ordered a new schooner from Crane and Grayson Shipbuilding. He was selling his old schooner that needed significant repairs. The minute I saw *Destiny*, I knew she had to be mine."

The deeply intimate tone in his voice made her look up at him. What she saw in his hungry expression made her bobble the oars.

"Careful," he said, saving the oar from slipping out of her hand. "Rowing with one oar is a challenge I don't think you're ready to attempt today."

Ducking her head and focusing on her task, she directed the conversation back to him. "So you purchased *Destiny* and made her seaworthy?"

"My best friend, Adam Grayson, and my mentor and good friend, Dawson Crane, one of the owners of Crane and Grayson Shipbuilding, and I invested together to purchase and repair

Destiny. Once she was ready to sail, I started transporting a variety of goods along the coast once or twice a month. The trips allow me to captain *Destiny* and to return my friends' investments. When I'm not sailing, I work at the shipyard."

"I want to hear all about Crane Landing… and the shipyard," she said, doing her best to hide her breathlessness. Rowing was surprisingly hard work. Three excruciating strokes later that seemed to take them nowhere, the captain slipped his hands over hers.

"I'm afraid if I don't take over now my crew will leave without us."

Feigning indignation, she gladly relinquished the oars into his strong, capable hands. He waited while she wobbled her way back to the bench seat opposite him before plunging the oars into the Atlantic and launching them toward the *Destiny*.

"Is this your way of avoiding my questions?" she asked, massaging her aching hands, and wishing she could release the cramp between her shoulders.

His grin seemed playful. "What would you like to know?"

"Everything, of course."

The captain's wonderful laugh floated out across the rippling Atlantic, the sound as mesmerizing as the songs he'd played on his guitar.

Is there someone special in your life?

Have you ever fallen in love?

Those were the real questions she wanted answered but would never ask.

"Fair warning," he said, slanting a wry grin her way, "I'm likely to tell you far more than you want to know."

"Consider me warned," she said. "But I'm truly curious about this place you seem so fond of."

"As you wish." He continued to work the oars, it seemed to Grace with little effort. "To understand our town, you need to know that it grew up around the shipbuilding trade, specifically Crane shipbuilding. They built ships and merchant vessels, but they

needed lumber to build their vessels, so Benjamin Grayson located his lumber mill adjacent to the shipyard. Other businesses were opened to supply the workers and their families with food, clothing, tools, and other necessities. Those businesses sprawled outward from the shipyard and created a string of shops and a full mile of wharves along the harbor. You should see it," he said, his voice sounding years younger. "A blacksmith and a sailmaker both set up shop close to the shipyard. Then a large livery provided strong, healthy horses for moving and hauling timber between the sawmill and shipyard. Soon afterwards, a merchant opened a general mercantile, and a woodworker opened a shop, both men plying their trades alongside the harbor. This was a good number of years ago, of course. But as the number of workers increased at the shipyard and the sawmill, other businesses flourished, and Bay Street was created, and then the businesses moved up what is now called Main Street."

Captivated, she said, "It sounds like a wonderfully industrious place."

"It's much more than that. It's also a beautiful place." He paused, seeming to be searching for words. "Crane Landing sits at the southern end of Maine on the Atlantic shore, and our winters can be harsh. But the spring and summer months bring fields of wildflowers, and apple and blueberry crops. Our forests are some of the richest and most beautiful you'll ever find, filled with white pine, cedar, hemlock, and about four dozen other types of trees that stretch from the town up into the mountains."

"I'd love to see that. Summer or winter," she said, thoroughly captivated with the picture he was painting. "It sounds utterly lovely."

"That's where I met your father, you know. In Crane Landing."

"What?" She straightened so quickly that she rocked the boat. "I thought you met him here on the Isle."

The captain shook his head. "He and Willy were living in Crane Landing when I met them. Elias Crane, one of the owners of Crane

Shipbuilding, introduced us. Your father and I had a mutual appreciation for sailing vessels, and we became fast friends. He only returned to Indigo Isle a few months ago when he—" The captain cleared his throat. "Your father found the Maine winters too harsh and thought a warmer clime might improve his health and give him and Willy a few more months together."

Grace's mind was awhirl with so many questions she couldn't give voice to a single one.

"Did you know we have a lighthouse in Crane Landing?" he asked.

Of course she didn't know that which the captain well knew, but he was apparently trying to steer the conversation away from her father.

"Ships can see the lighthouse from several miles out," he continued. "You can climb a winding staircase right to the top. From there you can see the town and the rocky shoreline for miles."

"What did my father do in Crane Landing?" she asked, steering the conversation right back to her father.

From the twinge of discomfort that crossed the captain's face, she could only assume he felt it was her father's place to share his past.

Instead of answering her, he gestured with his chin toward the looming hull of the ship where a rope ladder was being lowered by the crew. "We're here."

That meant the conversation was over. For now anyway.

As the captain maneuvered the boat alongside the *Destiny* it dawned on her that she was going to have to climb the ladder, which appeared far more difficult than descending it had been.

When she glanced at the captain, he was grinning. "It appears you are about to have another new experience today, Miss Covington."

Chapter Fifteen



While not a thriving port city like Philadelphia with its frenetic pace and international flavors, Charleston's greatest charm was in its slow, easy rhythm. Leo found himself mesmerized by Grace as she took in the city's intoxicating allure.

She looked a vision seated beside him in the carriage, her quick mind drinking in the sights and sounds around them: from the bleached oyster shells gleaming on the banks of the harbor to the towering palmetto trees dotting Bay Street with its incredible mansions, to the shouts and sounds of dockside commerce.

"Oh my," she said, looking up at him, her blue eyes sparkling in the sunlight that slanted across them. "This is spectacular."

Her obvious enjoyment pleased him deeply. "We'll walk and get a real taste of the city once we're done with our business here."

"You mean finding Gray and River?"

Just hearing his siblings' names spoken aloud left him feeling as if he'd been nicked by a sharp knife, the wound a constant sting. He knew he would have to share some of the details with Grace before too long. She hadn't demanded to be taken to a telephone to call her grandfather the minute they'd docked, so it was only fair that he keep his side of their bargain.

But he didn't want to talk about his siblings. Not right now. He wanted to give the beautiful woman beside him a short reprieve from all she'd endured and let her enjoy an hour or two of freedom in Charleston with him. Truth was that he could use a respite too.

Soon enough things would change. They always did.

"I have a few errands to tend to—one for your father and one for myself. But what I was really referring to is the business of shopping. For you." He sent her a grin. "There are many fine shops along King Street. I'll drop you off and leave you enough time to visit all of them."

A blush bloomed across her pretty cheeks as she glanced over at him. "Truly, that's not necessary. Just a few items to see me through the next few days or so are all I need," she insisted, her attention snared by handsome grillwork enclosing yet another massive home with tall, balconied windows.

He left it at that. He'd deliver her to one shop or ten, whatever she desired.

But looking at her now, he felt a fiend all over again for having snatched her from the Schuylkill River only to bundle her aboard his ship without her consent. Why had he not considered her discomfort in having no extra clothing to wear, no different shoes, or even a comb? She'd made do with what she had, or what he'd offered from his own wardrobe and bath, uttering no complaints. When she'd yearned for home, it was due to worry about her grandfather or Saul, never because she was fretting about her own comfort. She'd braided her hair each day, and it was absolutely beautiful—but how might she have styled her hair had she been home, and would she have had a maid to help?

Shame burned hot in his chest. He remembered too clearly the day his abusive, hard-drinking father had loaded his siblings—Ashe, Gray, Cal, and River—into the family's old dray and driven off. The only things his sister and brothers left home with were the ragged clothes on their backs. Cal hadn't even had both shoes on his feet.

Scrubbing a hand down his face, Leo tried to wipe away the memory. Even now, it could suck the breath from his lungs.

By the time they reached Chalmers Street, the sound of the horses' hooves and carriage wheels moving over the cobblestone street set a soft cadence echoing off the building fronts. Leo could

see that Grace had become enamored of it all—the city, the sunlight surrounding them, and the carriage ride, bumpy as it had become over the cobblestones.

He found himself envious of the breeze that caressed her flawless skin.

She leaned back into the cushion of the seat, smiling as she nodded her head toward the street. “How on earth did all these stones get here?”

“They’re ballast from the many ships that docked here, many years ago. Those ships left port laden with cotton and timber and no longer needed the stone for extra weight, so crew members tossed them out in the harbor areas… and the townspeople used them to pave their streets to cover the mud.”

Her smile rivaled the sunshine. “What a splendid story—and I love how something as simple as cobblestones are given new purpose in life.”

A gasp of delight spooled from her a second later as they passed a pink, two-story house with terra-cotta tiles for a roof. “That is so beautiful!”

“Catches your eye, doesn’t it?” At her nod, he added, “It’s made of Bermuda stone from the West Indies. That’s why it has a pink hue.”

“The place is utterly charming but looks old.”

He lifted both brows, blowing out a breath as he considered her statement. “Your father told me it’s one of the oldest in the city, which was founded in the late 1600s. It’s got a history that’s just as varied as Charleston’s. It was probably here when these streets were filled with low-country mud, a result of flooding from the harbor several times a year.”

“How remarkable,” she murmured, as if in salute of a structure that had stood the test of time and still could capture a person’s attention. “So you came here with my father?” she asked softly.

“I did. Twice. We were delivering wine here and taking cotton back to Maine.”

She nodded but didn't comment.

They moved out onto Meeting Street where there were more carriages and pedestrians.

"Remember the steeple I pointed out as we docked?" he asked, wanting to avoid the subject of her father. "There it is, straight ahead. It's St. Michael's church. The steeple is nearly two hundred feet tall."

As her gaze traveled upward her chin lifted, exposing her slender neck. "I can't even imagine the amount of wood it took to build such a structure."

"I can," he said, then gave her a wink when she looked at him.

She returned his smile. "I'm sure you can, with your history of working with lumber and building ships. By the way, young Micah Crane shared with me how you and your good friend, Adam Grayson, pulled him to safety from a log-jammed harbor. That was quite a daring feat."

"He told you that, did he?" Leo motioned for the hackney driver to head over to King Street and stop at Liberty's, which had been a dry goods shop but had become an emporium of ladies clothing and accessories. "It was Adam who risked his life that day, I simply lent some assistance. But both of us would do anything for Micah. He's a fine young man. I'm proud to have him crew on the *Destiny* with us."

"I'd say the young man is just as proud to serve under your captaincy."

Their driver began shouting to another driver as they each jostled for position in front of Liberty's. Not wanting to mar the morning with a street squabble, Leo quickly paid the man, disembarked, and then helped Grace down out of the carriage. A few seconds later, they were inside the brightly-lit store that held everything from shoes and hose to hats and hair pins—and every imaginable garment in between.

He watched as Grace transformed from a curious visitor discovering a new city to a confident young woman who knew

quality garments and her way around a department store. This was her world, he realized instantly; one of commerce conducted in luxurious shops.

A tall, middle-aged woman with an efficient manner hurried their way, introducing herself as the shop's owner. "What might you be looking for today?" she asked.

They answered at the same time: "Just a few things," Grace said, as Leo replied, "Whatever she desires."

The woman didn't miss a beat. "Splendid," she said, and with the wave of one hand directed a young assistant her way.

Was that a conspiratorial lifting of her brow? Leo wondered of the shop keeper, who seemed to be communicating silently with Grace as the assistant arrived. In the next moment, he was certain it must have been for the young assistant stood at the ready beside Grace, who was eyeing a rack of ready-made skirts and another nearby of blouses, while the owner expertly guided him toward a lone showcase of gentlemen's ties.

"I'm not in need of anything," he said, opting for bluntness, "but please give the lady whatever she'd like. She needs garments and accessories enough to see her through several days in the area." He pulled the leather billfold from his pocket, removing a number of bills. "This should be sufficient to begin her shopping. I'll settle the bill upon my return."

The efficient shop keeper made the bills disappear. "Of course," she murmured. "It'll be my pleasure."

Leo sensed that was his cue to leave. "Is an hour long enough?"

"Make it two," the shop owner suggested.

"Right." He looked back to where Grace was perusing a number of skirts. He made his way to her side and said, "Before I leave, I think you should write a note to your grandfather to let him know you're safe and in good health. I'll post it while I'm out."

Her eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"It was wrong of me to ask such a thing of you. But if you're willing to send a note instead of making a phone call it might

provide us both the time we need with your father." He gave her a wry grin. "I suspect your grandfather won't waste a minute retrieving you once he knows where to find you."

A mixture of relief and concern washed across her beautiful face. "Thank you. You're right of course on both counts. I need to let him know I'm alive and well. But doing so will put us both in his sights."

Leo arched an eyebrow. "Are you worried about me?"

A pink hue stained her cheeks, and she glanced away. "I would like to spend more time with my father is all."

"Of course," Leo said, but he wondered if Grace was beginning to like being free of her grandfather's watchful eye.

"There's no need for you to wait," she said. "I'll ask the shop owner to post the letter for me. Please go tend to your own business."

"All right then. I'll take care of my errands and return for you at five o'clock."

"Thank you," she said, turning away as if intensely interested in a drab brown skirt that Leo hoped she wouldn't purchase. She was meant to wear the colors of the ocean, blues and greens and seashell pink, not drab brown.

But instead of expressing his opinion, he headed out the door. If nothing else went right this day, at least Thomas's daughter would have fresh clothing and accoutrements. With that thought in mind, he headed for the lawyer's office, having to backtrack to Meeting Street.

Within a narrow-fronted, two-storied building that smelled of expensive wood polish and quality vellum, Leo listened as the bespectacled lawyer, Roland Goodman, who had long been Thomas's advocate, explained that the packet of papers Leo now held in his hands were the final wishes of their good friend Thomas Covington.

"Every document here constitutes Thomas's true last testament and considers all of his property, both real and personal. He saw to

it that each document was signed and witnessed during his last visit here," Mr. Goodman explained.

The leather packet, securely bound with ties, felt weighty in Leo's hands, and yet, how much should a man's life weigh when reduced to words on paper in his final hours?

A minute ago, Thomas's death seemed like some nebulous event Leo knew would happen at some point in time, but now it felt like smoke seeping through the cracks of a burning room he would soon have to enter.

"Store these papers safely, and then notify me when he… when Thomas passes."

Leo didn't want to think about that moment, what it would do to Willy, to Grace… to him.

The coming days would be rough.

No, they would be unbearable.

"Of course, Mr. Goodman." For a moment, Leo sat with his gaze fastened on the packet, then he addressed the lawyer. "Do you by chance know a family in the area by the name of Drayton who adopted two children ten or so years ago?"

Mr. Goodman's brows furrowed, and he seemed to be scouring his memories as if rifling through a huge drawer of files. "The only Draytons I know of own a bakery on King Street. You might inquire there."

The lawyer's statement surprised and thrilled Leo. He'd expected to run into another dead end. But the lawyer knew of a family named Drayton. Now Leo had a real lead and a chance, however small, that might lead to finding his brother and sister. "Thank you." He got to his feet and reached out to shake the man's hand.

Once outside the office, he put the packet under one arm and headed back to King Street with a determined stride and a hopeful heart.

Chapter Sixteen



The Riverside Bakery was a little over a block away from the dress shop where Leo had left Grace to restore her wardrobe. The name of the bakery seemed an odd choice because it was oceanside not riverside, but the only name he was concerned with at the moment was Drayton.

The bakery, Leo had learned from the lawyer, was owned by a Gordon and Pollyanna Drayton. If this stop were a dead end, which it would be if history repeated itself, Leo would spend the balance of his time visiting shops and doing what he could to dig up some real information. He wouldn't waste a minute of his time here on anything else.

The mouthwatering smells wafting out the screened windows of the bakery made his stomach growl. He was famished, and Grace was surely hungry by now as well. As soon as he finished inquiring about his siblings, he would head to the dress shop to fetch Grace and get them both a meal before leaving the city.

As he entered the bakery, he noticed a long service counter and several baking racks filled with fruit pies and fluffy donuts and loaves of bread and other baked goods. Five small tables were occupied by people, all of whom seemed to be lingering over the sweets on their plates and steaming cups of tea or mugs of fresh brewed coffee.

The intoxicating aroma of his favorite drink, strong black coffee, and the delicious smell of fresh baked bread drew him to the

counter like a sleepwalker. A middle-aged woman with salted brown hair twisted into a tidy bun and a white apron wrapped around her slender waist, greeted him. She wasn't a handsome woman exactly, but her smile was so warm and welcoming, and her soft southern drawl so sweet, that Leo found himself returning her smile.

"May I help you?" the woman asked, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Coffee, please," he said. He'd planned to ask his questions and scoot out the door to either follow up on the information he'd gained or to retrieve Grace and take her for a good meal before leaving port, but the aroma of coffee convinced him to order a steaming mug. Plus, it would be grossly impolite to blurt out his questions and walk out without patronizing the lady's business.

"Would you like a sweet to go with it?" she asked.

He glanced at the racks piled high with trays of delicious smelling breads, cakes, buns, scones, and pies. His stomach growled and demanded food. But he hadn't come here to eat. He'd come for answers. For any tidbit of information this kind lady might offer.

But he couldn't help eyeing a piece of rhubarb pie that was making his mouth water. Maybe he should purchase a piece for Grace. And for him. Or a whole pie to take back for Thomas and Willy and Letta. Or several pies to share among the crew….

At that moment, a young, slender girl swept through an open doorway carrying a tray of fluffy rolls with golden brown tops. She placed them on the counter where he stood in indecision with his palm full of coins and his mouth watering.

His stomach growled again.

The girl grinned. She wore a full white apron like the older woman, but instead of exuding warmth and southern charm the girl radiated a half-wild energy that surprised him. The young miss flashed a bright smile at him and nodded her head of dark, pinned up curls toward the rolls. "You should get one while its hot."

The older woman laid a gentle hand on the girl's arm. "The

gentleman just arrived. Give him time to look, dear. Put the rolls in the case."

"Yes, Mama," the girl said, but she cast a sly grin at Leo. "You're about to miss the most delicious bread ever baked."

He laughed. Something about the girl's playful taunt warmed him.

Her dimples deepened as she wiggled her dark eyebrows and began drawing the tray off the counter. "Last chance…" she said with a soft laugh.

"I'll take all of them." He gave the girl's mother a wink to let her know he was enjoying the exchange with her daughter and was happy to purchase the rolls. He would give them to his crew.

"You're far too kind," the older woman said while casting a censuring sidelong glance at the girl.

"I wager he'll be thanking us, Mama, for helping him make an excellent choice," the girl said, leaving the tray on the counter as she turned and gave her mother a cheerful peck on the cheek.

The girl's profile gave him a sharp jolt. The slope of her jaw, the turn of her lips, and the shape of her eyes were hauntingly familiar. He'd seen that face before.

Noticing that her mother was casting a disapproving eye his way, Leo chastised himself for being inappropriate and studying the girl so closely. But he'd seen that profile and that smile somewhere. Her laugh, although just a hint of one, took him back to his childhood. There hadn't been much laughter then, especially for his hardheaded brother Cal, but the rolling sound of a young boy's laugh still echoed in Leo's brain and heart—and he was hearing it again.

Slipping past her mother, the girl boxed up the tray of rolls. While the young miss was engaged in her task, her mother served Leo his coffee and tucked his payment in her register.

A moment later, he accepted the package of rolls and the cup of coffee and made his way to a small table by the front window. But after only a few hot, delicious sips, he couldn't hold himself back. In

two long strides he returned to the counter, cup and packages in hand.

Both ladies seemed a bit surprised by his sudden reappearance.

“Is something amiss?” the older woman asked.

“Yes, but not with the coffee.” He found himself inspecting the girl in minute detail, seeing a stranger, and yet feeling he’d met her before. “I have some questions that might seem intrusive and yet I simply must ask them.”

The warmth in the woman’s eyes turned cool as she watched him inspecting her daughter. Gently, she nudged the girl toward the back room.

Although the young miss obeyed and moved to the open doorway, she remained there listening attentively.

“I apologize,” he said to her mother, immediately regretting his bumbling approach. “I hadn’t meant to be inappropriate or elicit your concern. It’s just that I’m trying to find my younger brother and sister who I believe were adopted by a couple named Drayton in this area over a decade ago.” He glanced at the girl then back to her mother. “Your daughter’s laugh reminds me of my younger brother’s laugh. And I see some resemblance to my own mother in your daughter’s face.” He shook his head. “It’s probably just wishful thinking, but that’s why I was studying her.”

Incredulity seemed to fill the woman’s eyes.

“But that doesn’t excuse my inappropriate actions,” he said, lifting his hand and apologizing again.

The young girl moved to her mother’s side, her expression filled with avid curiosity. “Are you Cal?”

The name, spoken so softly and filled with wonder, slammed into Leo’s chest like a sledgehammer. For several seconds he couldn’t breathe.

“Are you Cal Sullivan?” the girl asked again, inspecting him as closely as he had been inspecting her.

He shook his head and sucked air into his shocked lungs. “No,” he said hoarsely. “I’m Leo Sullivan, and I’m looking for my brothers

Cal and Gray—and my sister River."

The older woman pressed her fingers to her lips and stared at him wide-eyed. But the girl's face blossomed into a joyful smile. "Gray will be so disappointed that he missed you."

A swirling sensation spun through Leo. The floor beneath his feet slanted as if he were standing on the deck of *Destiny* in an ocean of deep, rolling waves. He braced his hands on the counter to steady himself. His heart thundered in his chest, and emotion wrung his throat like a wet washcloth.

The girl thrust her hand across the counter and offered it to him. "I'm River, and I'm very happy to finally meet you."

Glancing at her mother, Leo received a slight nod of approval. Clasping the hand of his little sister, once so tiny in his grasp, now the hand of a vivacious young lady, was nearly his undoing. He couldn't breathe. He wanted to pull her into his arms and hug her. He wanted to blurt out apologies and share how desperately he'd searched for her and to express his joy at finally finding her, but he couldn't squeeze a single word from his tight throat.

"Why don't you come in the back where we can all visit for a spell," River's mother suggested, her voice again filled with warmth and southern charm. She nodded for Leo to bring his coffee and package of rolls and follow them, which he did.

They entered a large, bright kitchen with two big black ovens and a wide, waist-high table with a rolling pin on top lying in a thick dusting of flour. Two tall baker's racks stood against one wall beside a deep sink filled with baking trays in need of washing. A small rectangular table sat at the back of the room, positioned under a large window that overlooked a small street dotted with trees. Sunshine slanted across the maple tabletop and puddled on the tiled floor.

Mrs. Drayton indicated he should sit opposite her and River.

Thankful for the high-backed wooden bench seat that helped keep him upright when he still felt lightheaded, Leo sat in stunned silence. He wanted to pinch himself to make sure it wasn't just

another hope-filled dream that he would awaken from only to have his heart smashed against the rocks. He'd been searching for his family for so long, had endured reams of bad information and innumerable disappointments, and though he'd refused to give up, he'd never expected to walk into a bakery and find his sister. Never. Not even in his most vivid, hopeful dreams.

"I don't remember you," River said frankly, her eyes, so like their mother's, boldly meeting his.

With a slight nod he acknowledged her forthright statement, and cupped his shaking hands around his coffee mug. "I remember you," he said, struggling to push words from his tight throat. "You were a beautiful baby with a head full of black curls and a cry that could be heard two states away."

A delighted laugh bubbled up from his sister's throat. She had become such a beautiful girl with high cheekbones and bright blue eyes and a smile that illuminated her whole face.

"I can vouch for that," her mother said, surprising them both. She turned a gentle smile on Leo. "River and Gray have been the light of my life."

Too choked up to reply, Leo could only nod. Waves of joy and relief were rolling through him, crashing into an ocean of regret and heartache, churning up the past and knocking him off balance.

"I want you to know that we went back for Cal," Mrs. Drayton said. "We tried for years to find the boy." Sadness washed across her face. "It broke Gray's heart to leave his little brother, and I'll never forgive myself for forcing Gray to choose between his baby sister and his little brother." She raised tormented eyes, seeming to offer a silent apology to Leo. "We just wanted a baby. We fell in love with River the minute we saw her, but Gray refused to let her go. We explained that we could give her a good life, that she would be loved and well taken care of, none of which he would take on good faith. He insisted that he wouldn't leave his sister's side until she was grown up and married to a man who could take care of her. His dedication and love broke our hearts wide open. We fell in love

with that boy right then and there, and we decided we wanted him too."

River slipped her arm around her mother's shoulders and gave her a light squeeze. "That was the luckiest day of my life, Mama."

Moisture beaded the woman's eyes, and she gave River's hand a gentle squeeze. Her love and her regret were so intense in that moment that Leo felt his own heart cramp in empathy. "But Gray shouldn't have had to choose between his sister and his brother."

After a shaky inhale, Mrs. Drayton continued. "Gray begged us to take Cal with us. But to take in three children when we'd only planned on one child was… well, it was too much to consider in the moment. And the boy didn't exactly take to us. Cal kicked my husband in the shins, pummeled his legs, and threw such a rage that we hurried away with Gray and River, hoping our absence would allow the boy to calm down."

The painful scene came vividly to life in Leo's mind. He remembered so clearly the rages that would overtake Cal, how the boy would yell and kick and throw things. Leo had truly feared for Cal's life on many occasions when his little brother would rebel against their father's heavy hand. Leo's last memory of his little brother was so jarring and heartbreaking that even a minor appearance of the memory would leave him shaken and broken for days.

"From the moment we brought Gray and River home, Gray begged us incessantly to go back for Cal," she continued. "So we did. For five years Gordon made several trips trying to find the boy, but each time the boy had been moved to another place, dumped in another home, or sent to work on another farm, and he was even left at an orphanage, but just when Gordon thought he'd tracked down Cal, he learned that the boy had run away. After that there were no leads to follow. Cal was gone." Her eyes watered and she lowered her face. "Gray was devastated. But there was nothing more we could do."

River patted her mother's hand. "You and Daddy tried. And

Gray has never stopped looking for Cal. We'll find him, Mama."

To think that Cal, at five years old, had been shuffled from home to home, farm to farm, to an orphanage and who knows what else, wrenched Leo's heart so hard he nearly cried out from the pain. The smell of baked goods that had only minutes before made his stomach growl with hunger now nauseated him. It was his fault that his family was shattered. It was his fault that Cal had suffered. It was his fault that Gray had been forced to make an unthinkable choice.

"Mr. Sullivan," River said, wrenching Leo's attention back to her. "Should I call you Mr. Sullivan or… well, you're my brother so…" She shrugged and released a half-laugh. "I haven't a clue how to properly address you."

In that moment, Leo could see that his little sister was a lot like Cal, willing to speak her mind clearly and meet things head-on.

He struggled hard to dredge up a smile for her, for his little sister who didn't know him at all. "I know I'm a stranger to you, but I'm your brother and would like to be addressed as such." He cut his gaze to her mother. "If you approve, Mrs. Drayton, may she call me Leo?"

Mrs. Drayton glanced at River and then back at him. "Of course. And you may call me Polly."

Her kindness to him, and her obvious love for River and Gray, sent a stream of warmth coursing through the frozen landscape of Leo's heart. Knowing that River, Gray, and Ashe had all found good homes melted away some of the icebergs that had kept him shipwrecked in life. If only Cal could have found a loving home of his own. But he hadn't. At least not early on. Maybe he had eventually, like Leo and Benny had found with Tansy and Cyrus. But if not… he must have felt abandoned by his entire family.

"Mr. Sull—Leo," River began, correcting herself with a light laugh. "I know Gray would want to see you, but he's out of town for his job. He's a detective for the Pinkerton Agency," she said proudly. "Someday I'm going to work for them as well."

Leo grinned. He couldn't help it. River was so earnest in her desire and confident in her assertion that she would succeed at whatever she chose to do, it reminded him of Cal. Once the boy had set his mind to something there was no stopping him. Leo was seven years older than Cal, but even as a five-year-old Cal didn't cower in the face of adversity… or in the face of an older brother who could have squashed him like a bug. The kid just clenched his fists, put his head down, and drove through any obstacle or person in his way. Where Cal's confidence had been fueled by his anger, River's confidence seemed to be fueled by intelligence and the unwavering love and support of her parents.

Leo couldn't imagine what that must feel like… to be supported and encouraged and loved. Then again, maybe he could. He'd been loved and supported and encouraged by Tansy and Cyrus and by his extended Grayson family and by Thomas. The difference was, River had been a baby when she was taken in by the Draytons. For River, they had always been her parents. For Leo, his mother was dead, his father was an abusive liar, and the people that he cared about didn't belong to him.

"Rest assured, Leo," River continued, "we will let Gray know about you as soon as he calls home." She clasped her hands in front of her chest, her excitement palpable. "How I wish I could see his face when he finds out about you!"

"Me too," Leo said, which made her smile widen. "Do you have an address for Gray?" he asked. He would sail an ocean, take a train across the country, or walk the leather off his boots to meet his brother if that's what it took.

River shook her head. "He never tells us where he's going or how long he'll be gone, which drives Mama mad with worry."

"His job can be dangerous," Mrs. Drayton said, defending herself.

"Oh, Mama, you know that Gray can take care of himself." River interlaced her fingers and propped her hands on the tabletop in front of her. "Tell me all about you," she said to Leo, her eyes filled

with avid curiosity. “Where have you been? Where do you live? Where do you work? How did you find us?”

Her mother gasped at her indelicate directness.

Leo laughed.

And River waited impatiently for him to answer all her questions.

And so Leo spent the next forty minutes trying to appease his little sister’s boundless curiosity. She accepted the surface details but pressed him relentlessly about their family history, nodding when it aligned with what Gray had remembered, and wanting to know how his search for his siblings had affected his life.

Leo did his best to answer her questions honestly and yet protect her innocence. To parry her direct and perhaps too inquisitive questions, he turned them back on her. He learned that she was exceptionally bright, was a vast and avid reader, enjoyed writing and had even contributed a short article about how to bake a perfect cinnamon roll to *The Weekly News and Courier*. And he was quickly learning that his little sister was like a gnat that wouldn’t relent no matter how many times he redirected her pointed attack.

“Gracious, River, give your brother a moment to breathe,” Mrs. Drayton said, placing a hand on River’s shoulder. “Maybe he’ll agree to come for supper so he can meet your father and answer the other dozen questions I suspect are lining up in your mind.”

River’s eyes lit up and she beamed a smile at Leo. “Yes, please say you’ll come for supper!”

He wanted to accept and spend more time getting to know his spirited little sister, but Grace would be waiting for him—and Thomas might not.

“I’d love nothing better. Truly. But I’m afraid I have other obligations I must see to. I’ll definitely return though. I want to meet your father and hear more about you, River.” He turned to Mrs. Drayton, hoping she could see the gratitude in his eyes. “Thank you… for everything.” For loving my sister. For loving my brother. For trying to find Cal. For welcoming me into your life and

giving me back my sister, and hopefully soon my brother.

As if she knew he couldn't force any more words from his throat, she rose from the table. "Take another minute with your sister while I'll write our address down for you."

Once her mother was out of earshot, River leaned across the table, locked eyes with him, and said in a low voice, "You have to find Cal. It's the only thing that will help Gray forgive my parents and resolve the one mystery he's been unable to solve. Not knowing what happened to Cal is killing him."

Chapter Seventeen



Unable to fall asleep after returning from Charleston, Grace opened the shutters to let the night air into the guest room she was still occupying. She had planned to leave this place after one night, but here she was with her mind awhirl and her heart breaking.

Her father hadn't woken for more than a couple minutes that evening, and when he had come around, he'd been confused and in pain.

Willy had climbed into bed beside their father, refusing to go to his own room as if he sensed the dwindling time he had left with his papa. They were both sleeping now; one in the peaceful innocence of a child, the other in the fitful pain-filled throes of a dying man.

The captain had looked in on her father and conferred with Letta twice about his condition, but then he'd left the house with little more than a goodnight to Grace.

She was alone now and feeling the weight of the world on her shoulders.

Her father was dying.

She would soon be responsible for raising her little brother.

And she was drawn to a man who was not her intended.

A man who was haunted and suddenly unreachable.

The wind that had rattled the shutters earlier had finally died down. Gazing out the window at the moonlit tide pool, she was surprised to see Captain Sullivan there, crouched near the water's

edge, his head down, his dark hair loose and falling forward to shield his face. He looked to be a man in pain, perhaps fighting whatever demons had seemed to follow him from Charleston.

What had begun as a surprisingly enjoyable trip had turned awkward and silent. The man who had taught her how to row a boat and who had shown her the sights of Charleston was not the same man who'd commanded the ship on their return. For whatever reason, the captain had become a brooding man lost in thoughts too deep for her to breach. So she had found her own place on *Destiny*'s deck to hash out her feelings that had become a hopeless snarl.

She understood why her feelings toward her father had become an intricate, complicated weave of dangling threads. What she didn't understand is why she was having completely inappropriate thoughts about the captain, or why a small part of her didn't want to return to her previous life in Philadelphia. Perhaps it was simply the freedom of not being confined by the strict social mores of her everyday life. It was as if she'd been released from a too-tight corset and was able to draw a full breath for the first time since her childhood.

She'd plucked at those threads the entire trip back to Indigo Isle, trying to unravel her thoughts and feelings, but she'd merely twisted them into a bigger tangle.

She was truly and utterly lost.

Her life was upside down.

There were no answers in the dark outside her window. Only the captain sitting alone by the tide pool. Seeing him there in the moonlight created a deep longing in her—one she'd never experienced. She shouldn't even like the man, but she did. Despite his highhanded actions in kidnapping her, he'd done her a favor. He'd saved her from drowning. He'd given her a reprieve from her grandfather's oppressive love. He'd given her back her father, however briefly and to whatever extent she could forgive and reconcile with him. The captain had opened the world to her on the deck of *Destiny*.

And now she was questioning whether friendship would be enough in a marriage to Devon.

Releasing a long sigh, she turned from the window before she acted on her misguided impulse. She wanted to talk to the captain, to resurrect the playful man he'd been while teaching her to row a boat, to let his presence calm her, and to try to understand why she was drawn to the very man who had kidnapped her.

Even acknowledging it to herself shamed her.

And so she headed to bed, hoping sleep would relieve her burdened mind. But a soft knock on the door and Willy's frightened voice coming from the other side turned her back.

She opened the door to find him wringing his hands. "Papa is calling for you. He doesn't feel well."

Slipping her arm around Willy's small shoulders, Grace walked him to his room. "I'll stay with Papa tonight so you can get some sleep."

Willy hesitated at the door to his room, his worried expression indicating his uncertainty.

"It's all right. I'll take good care of him," she said, assuring her little brother that she could carry their shared burden for a while.

"All right," he said, entering his room, but then turned back to add, "but tell Papa I'll come right back if he needs me."

"I will," she said, giving her little brother a reassuring smile and shooing him off to bed.

A moment later she entered her father's room to hear him calling her name. The sound of his voice, of him calling to her, beckoned her back to her childhood, to a time when she was innocent like Willy and believed life would always be good and that her father would always be there to hold her hand, to hold her up, to hold her together.

The sight of him, once a seafaring strapping man now withered like a salted strip of jerky, wrung her heart. Her father was suffering deeply. Fighting her own pain and sadness, she sat on the edge of his bed and took his bony hand in her own. "I'm here, Papa. What

can I do to help?"

"Sit with me," he said, his voice graveled and so weak she barely heard his request. His eyes closed as if it took too much effort to keep them open. "Tell me about you and what I've missed…"

And so she began a story she couldn't candidly tell because the truth would add too much pain to a man who couldn't bear any more. Her own grief cut deep, but sharing that with him, blaming him, wouldn't give her the answers she sought or give them back the years they'd lost. So she told him of her childhood, of playing with Saul, of learning to dance and how to be socially appropriate when visiting friends and attending functions. She had an ear for music and a hand for drawing and a heart for helping others. For her father's sake, she portrayed her life as a girl blessed with a wealthy, doting grandfather who left her wanting for nothing. It was partially true, and partially a lie, and suddenly it didn't seem to matter.

She wasn't sure at what point her father had drifted into sleep or into a drugged oblivion, but she sat with him until Letta entered the room and scooted her off to bed.

But Grace knew she wouldn't sleep.

She was too restless and confused and… scared.

The house felt stifling, so she slipped down the stairs and out the door. Snugging her borrowed robe close—it had seemed a waste to purchase a new ladies robe for a few days' use, or so she'd told herself at the dress shop because she couldn't admit, even to herself, that she enjoyed the feel and scent of the captain's robe—she leaned against the porch column, hoping the fresh air would clear her mind.

The tide pool glistened in moonlight, and the soft sound of a guitar floated to her on an ocean breeze.

The captain was still out there.

Despite her state of undress and the silent warning circling her mind, she moved forward, her feet and heart knowing exactly where they wanted to go.

Sand caressed her bare toes as she walked the beach toward the tide pool, toward the captain, toward a choice she might regret for the rest of her life. But right or wrong, she needed to understand why the man held such sway over her emotions.

Her robe, *his* robe, flapped softly around her bare calves, and wisps of her unbound hair fluttered around her face. She knew her actions were scandalous, but she couldn't seem to rein her emotions or suppress the feeling of utter freedom that made her eyes tear with gratitude.

At her approach, the captain raised his head, his dark eyes meeting hers. His face didn't register surprise at her presence or shock at her state of undress. He just watched her move in as his fingers stilled on the strings.

"Is everything all right?" he asked quietly.

"For now," she said, knowing he was asking about her father. "But that's the question I came to ask you."

Despite the moonlight that painted a silver swath across the beach, the night was still shadowed, which made it difficult to read any subtleties in his expression.

"I don't know," he said, his voice quiet, thoughtful.

Of the possible responses she'd anticipated, she hadn't expected this one. There was something vulnerable in his voice, as if he were making a confession or baring his soul, revealing so much and yet saying so little.

Instead of pressing him to expound on his comment, she tucked the robe around her legs and sat beside him on a log that had once been a tree and was now a large piece of driftwood washed up on the beach.

"While we were in Charleston, I called my friend Miles at the Old Anchor Inn," he said, his voice quiet in the night. "I asked him for news of Fairview and specifically of Saul."

"You did?" she asked in surprise.

With a slow nod, he said, "Saul is in good health and well protected at Fairview. Your grandfather, however, was quite shaken

by your disappearance. I'm sure he'll be deeply relieved to know you are here safe with your father."

She grimaced, smote by guilt. "I didn't tell him where I was," she admitted, eliciting a raised eyebrow from the captain. "I couldn't risk having him take me home or… well, having him punish you. I just told him I'd had to rush off on a personal errand and apologized for my unexpected departure."

The captain's other eyebrow lifted. "Are you protecting me, Miss Covington?"

Realizing that's exactly what she was doing whipped up a storm of questions she couldn't readily answer. "I'm protecting my time here is all."

They sat in silence for a few minutes with both of them watching the small frothing waves lapping the shore.

Finally he said, "I met my sister today."

Grace gaped at him in speechless surprise. From what he'd mentioned earlier in the day, before they'd gone to Charleston, he hadn't seen his siblings in over a decade. How could he have met his long-estranged sister and not have shared that information with her or his crew or at least his first mate? She would have expected him to be ringing the ship's bell and shouting the news across the deck.

But he hadn't said a word about the amazing thing that had surely changed his life. His confession explained his brooding demeanor on their trip back to Indigo Isle, but it left her with many questions.

"Where did you find her? How? I mean…" She released a breathless laugh. "Tell me about her. What happened? How did you find her?"

For the first time since leaving Charleston, a half-smile tilted the captain's lips.

"I apologize," she said immediately. "How impolite of me to ask such personal questions. It's just that today you didn't seem very certain of finding your sister or your brother. And you have!"

“I still can’t believe it,” he said. “It seems I’ve been looking for them all my life, and every path I followed led me into a blind alley.” He draped his arm over the guitar and slowly shook his head as if still overcome with disbelief. “I walked into a bakery and there she was, this beautiful young lady who looks like my mother and acts like my brother Cal, and I just… I could barely keep my balance. I was so glad and relieved to find her, to know she was healthy and had a loving home, but she didn’t know me. And I didn’t know her either, really, at least not the young lady she’d become. And that made me furious with my father and with—” He broke off and clenched his jaw. A moment later he said, “I will commit myself to nothing else until I’ve found Cal and have caught up with Gray. I should have done more to keep my father from breaking up our family.”

“Was your sister not better off with her new family?” Grace asked, feeling genuine concern for the captain and his siblings.

He sighed and gave a nod of acknowledgment. “She was.”

There was no question mark in his statement. The captain believed that his sister had been better off away from their father. And given what he’d told Grace aboard *Destiny* about being homeless because of his father, she, too, believed that his sister had been better off with the couple who’d adopted her.

“What was she like?” Grace asked, overcome with curiosity.

For a moment, he said nothing, just seemed to ponder the question. Then he said, “She was… mesmerizing. One moment I would see a playful young girl, and the next I’d see a spirited, bright young lady. It’s as if she were dancing on a bridge between girlhood and womanhood, with one turn spinning her back toward her youth and another turning her toward her future self. I was intrigued and impressed with her.”

The softness of the night wrapped around them as they sat in silence, both of them lost in thought for the moment.

Grace didn’t know where the captain’s thoughts wandered, but her own were centered on him and what he must be feeling. “I’m

sorry you had to cut your reunion with your sister short to bring me back today."

"We both needed to return," he said, and she knew exactly what he meant. She'd seen the truth earlier when she'd sat at her father's bedside.

Time was running out.

She'd never felt more helpless in her life. "Did you know that Willy was sleeping with Papa earlier?" she asked.

The captain nodded. "He does that when your father is having a bad spell."

"Are you saying that Willy still believes Papa will get better?"

"Unfortunately, yes. Because until now your father has fought his way back."

"Do you think maybe—" She stopped herself from asking a question to which she already knew the answer. There were no "maybes" anymore. "Did you meet your brother, too?" she asked, desperate to shift the subject away from her father and the inevitability she couldn't bear to think about.

"No, he was out of town for work," the captain said. And to her surprise, he shared what he had learned about his brother working for the Pinkerton Agency, and then he added with a grin that his sister intended to do the same.

His comment made Grace smile but not because she doubted that a woman could manage such a job but because he seemed both surprised by and immensely pleased with his sister's confident, if not naïve, belief.

As they talked, his mood seemed to mellow with the night and their quiet conversation. He wasn't looking at the water now. He was looking at her.

Suddenly, she became acutely aware that she was in her night clothes and alone in the dark with a man. A strong, virile man. The fact that she felt more alive than she'd ever been in her life should have shamed her, but she didn't feel shame. She felt awake and wildly curious.

A breeze tossed his hair around his neck and shoulders. She clenched her hands in her lap to keep herself from brushing it off his face.

Without taking his eyes off her, the captain's long fingers strummed lightly across the strings of his guitar. A soft chord floated into the night, seeming to synchronize with the ocean and the breeze and the beating of her heart.

There were no words to the song he played, just long, lazy notes and chords that wrapped around her like a warm pair of arms. As the final notes drifted across the beach, he leaned in slowly, cupped a gentle hand beneath her chin, and brushed his lips against hers.

Warmth surged through her body and tremors radiated out from her chest to her limbs. A soft moan of surprise and intense pleasure vibrated in her throat. She hadn't expected this intimate moment or her powerful reaction. But she wanted to linger in the wonderful sensations rippling through her.

"Grace…" he whispered, his lips barely lifted from hers, his breath warm against her face, "You should go in now."

She should.

She must.

But she couldn't.

She was too dizzy to stand up.

His warm palm moved up to her face, his fingers slipping into her hair as their lips met again.

Never in her life had she experienced such a sensation. Her heart swelled in her chest, lifting her off the ground like a hot air balloon. For the first time since childhood she felt a sense of wonder and pleasure. This man who had turned her life upside down was shaking her awake and pouring hope back into her empty, aching heart.

He was showing her that life was wonderfully exciting.

Slowly he eased away. "Please go inside now."

Although his request was kind and his voice gentle, she heard the underlying warning in his tone.

A flood of warmth suffused her face and neck as she stood. Hoping her shaking legs would keep her upright, she tugged the robe tight about her. Every nerve in her body still thrummed from the captain's touch.

She'd gone too far, let her emotions carry her straight into an awkward and inappropriate situation, and yet she couldn't summon an ounce of regret. She was glad she'd come, glad she'd stolen one magical moment for herself because she knew she might never again have a moment like this.

Chapter Eighteen

After breakfast, which Grace's father didn't eat, he asked the captain and Letta to help him dress. He insisted he was going to take Grace to his favorite place. But he was so weak he couldn't stand on his own, and by the time the captain got him to the porch, her father had to sit there for a good twenty minutes just to catch his breath.

Still, his breath continued to be labored and the grimace lines in his face deepened. Both Grace and the captain tried to talk her father into going back to bed, but he insisted he must go to his place this morning.

Willy wanted to go with them, but their father explained he needed some time alone with Grace. Willy accepted the news without complaint, but he seemed unable to leave his father's side. They sat together on the wide porch chair with Willy tucked tight against their father's side, the two of them talking quietly as Grace and the captain moved to the other end of the porch to give them time—that was growing so precious—together. The low murmur of their voices and the occasional sniggering and laughter of their private exchanges warmed Grace. She was glad that Willy could have this special bond with their father.

The captain caught her eye, and a hot flush suffused her face and neck. He didn't look away. She did. But when she dared to glance his way again, he was still standing and leaning against the porch railing, his booted feet crossed at the ankles, his muscular

arms folded across his chest. He wasn't staring at her exactly. He seemed to be taking her in with the landscape, his gaze sweeping across the beach and back to her as the breeze tossed strands of his hair that had come loose from his queue.

Casually, he moved his attention to her father and Willy who was still tucked close against him. "Willy, when I get back from helping your father out to the sanctuary, will you show me where you saw that river otter?"

"Sure will!" Willy said, coming to life for the first time all morning. As if he couldn't contain his excitement, he began to slide off the chair, but her father caught Willy's arm and told the boy to hold up and give him a hug. Willy threw his arms around their father's neck and gave him an exuberant hug. Grace worried it might hurt her father, but his face was wreathed in such joy and sadness she had to turn away to hide the rush of tears that burned her eyes. She heard her father's weary laugh and his tender words of love to his son and Willy's hope that his father would feel well enough to go see the river otter with him when he got back. Then the boy was off across the porch, down the steps, and nearly bowled over Fogg in his rush to the beach.

As soon as Fogg reached the porch, her father said he was ready to go. Grace and the captain helped him to his feet. Hooking one frail arm around the strong shoulders of each man, her father gave the nod to move out.

The three of them set off with Grace following along. From her vantage point she could see that her father's feet barely touched the ground. It would have been easier for either man to carry her father, but she suspected they wanted to spare him the humiliation.

Slow as snails, they crossed the wooden boardwalk to a worn dirt path that wound through tall evergreen trees and lush blooming bushes that finally gave way to a small clearing. A large rock formation sat at the center of the protected clearing with a tide pool off in the distance and far beyond that the vast ocean lapping the sandy shore.

As her eyes took in her surroundings, she stared in astonishment. Her father had told her of this place. It was the summer before her mother died, the three of them were picnicking at their usual spot near the Schuylkill River, and Grace had declared that it was her favorite spot in the whole world.

Laughing, her father had swept her off her feet and twirled her in a dizzying circle. “I bet you’ll change your mind when I take you and your mother to my secret sanctuary,” he’d said.

Secret sanctuary? The idea of her father having a secret place had utterly captivated Grace. Spellbound, she’d sat beside him on their blanket while he described what sounded like the most beautiful place in the world.

It was a secluded inlet he’d found just off the southernmost beach on a small island. He said he’d crossed a beach of glistening white sand and followed a wooded path that wound through red cedars, live oak, and palmetto trees to an area lush with swallow-wort and blooming salt myrtle shrubs. The amazing thing, he’d added, was that the shrubs were covered with butterflies; mostly monarchs that were migrating north but also what he’d later learned were common buckeye and painted ladies. He’d described the butterflies in minute detail with their vivid colors of orange and black, some that had spots of black, blue, and pink, and he’d seen several large yellow butterflies called cloudless sulfurs that made the island their home.

Grace had barely been able to imagine such a wonder. But now, seeing it all with her own eyes, the sight left her breathless. Butterflies were everywhere, some of them resting or feeding on the yellow blossoms of the salt myrtle shrub and some flitting around the bushes as if seeking an opening amid the cluster of wings in which to land.

Her father had promised to bring her and her mother to his secret sanctuary. He said as soon as he was free of his commitments, they would make the trip. He wouldn’t say more than that despite Grace’s endless questions, claiming he planned to

surprise them with a family trip. He said that they would sail to the island, row ashore with a picnic lunch and a fishing net, and spend the whole day together.

In those days, Grace had believed his every word. In her young eyes, he put warmth into the day and gave meaning to every moment. Anything she'd wanted to know how to do, she would say, "Show me, Papa." And he would. In their happiest days together, he had taught her so many things: how to tie knots like a sailor, shoot marbles, even suture a simple cut.

Finally the day came when they were going to go to the island to see her father's secret sanctuary and something special he'd purchased for her and her mother. Grace's grandparents were going with them, and Carl and Mildred Smith, Saul's parents, both dear friends of the family were coming along too. There was such a joyous sense of festivity that day as they boarded the sailboat, a ketch-rigged smack, that her grandfather had rented because her father's own ship was in repair. The first hour had been filled with laughter and much finagling on deck as the men hoisted and maneuvered sails and the ladies laid out a picnic lunch, and Grace and Saul clung to the railing agog at the sights.

Then the wind kicked up and the sky grew dark. The ladies scooped up the picnic items and hurried to the cabin to get out of the lashing wind.

Grandfather said they needed to turn back, but her father insisted they could sail through the storm—and Grace had believed him.

Her grandfather had not. He'd argued, then shouted and demanded that her father, who was the only one skilled enough to handle the sailboat, turn around and get them back to shore posthaste.

That's when he'd ordered Grace and Saul to go to the cabin. From inside, Grace was able to see through the window in the cabin door that her father and grandfather continued to debate each other's wisdom… and that the storm was getting worse, as was their

arguing.

She was afraid, and she could see that her mother and grandmother and Saul's mother were too. Grabbing Saul's hand, she signaled him to silence and slipped out the door with him in tow. Together they could appeal to their fathers to take them home.

On deck in the lashing rain and howling wind, her father shouted orders to her grandfather and Saul's father who both seemed as confused and afraid as she was.

Her father just seemed angry at their ineptness and continued to shout orders to tighten that line or loosen that sail or about a dozen things that the other men were unable to understand or manage. Finally, he threw his hands up and said he would turn back because he couldn't pilot the boat without a decent crew.

Her grandfather released the rope he was holding to throw out an angry fist at her father's jaw, calling him a fool who should have turned back at the first sign of trouble.

At that moment, the boat bucked wildly in the choppy waves that were pounding the hull and soaking the deck. A sudden howling gust caught the sails, and the boat that her father had been so certain could handle the storm, dropped to one side, tossing her and Saul and the men to the deck where they rolled like barrels and toppled straight over the low railing into the roiling Atlantic.

As she sank, she saw the mast sink…

"Grace… Miss Covington." The captain's voice and the feel of his hand jostling her elbow cut into her nightmare. "Are you all right?"

The sight of trees and shrubs and butterflies and sunshine saved her, and she released the breath she'd been holding. "Yes," she said, but she was honestly shaken by the memory.

That accident had taken her mother and grandmother and Saul's mother and father. So many lives lost. And Saul had sustained a terrible head injury that had nearly cost him his life.

After that day everyone who had survived had changed. Her grandfather blamed her father for the accident. Her father blamed

himself, too, and had left Fairview as soon as his ship was repaired a mere two weeks later. He'd planned a short trip to Maine, but that was the last time Grace had seen her father until she'd stepped foot on Indigo Isle.

The memory of those bleak days tore through her, but she refused to drown in those sorrows again, especially today when she and her father were finally going to have a chance to talk. Despite the circumstances of how she'd come to be here, her father had finally brought her to his secret sanctuary and had given her one of the most beautiful gifts of her life.

He'd wanted to share this with her and her mother.

He'd said he wanted to come back for Grace and be a father to her again but that he couldn't. What did that mean? Why couldn't he? What had stopped him from coming back after he was released from prison? Was it because he had a son? Surely he would have known that Grace would have accepted Willy. Why couldn't her father have loved and raised both of his children?

While the captain and Fogg settled her father onto a deep seat-like indentation in the huge rock where he could sit and lean back to rest, Grace dragged her thoughts away from the past.

"I'm sorry, Gracie. I should have had Leo bring a chair for you," her father said, his voice shaky and breathless but free of the slurring induced by the medications he'd been taking.

"Would you like me to fetch one for you?" the captain asked.

She glanced up at him, her face warming as it had each time their eyes had met that morning. Was he thinking about their kiss too? "No, thank you, Captain."

He lowered his voice and leaned closer. "Your father won't be able to tolerate being out here for long."

"I know," she said, letting the captain know that she understood how much this walk had cost her father and that she would be gentle and quick with her questions.

With a nod of acknowledgment, the captain headed back down the path with Fogg, and Grace returned to her father who was

cradled like a child in a deep rounded nook in the rock. The sight made her smile, and that made him smile.

"I've spent a lot of hours sitting here," he said, his voice weak, but there seemed to be a new contentment in his eyes. "When I first saw the butterflies, I couldn't wait to bring you and your mother here," he said. "I knew you would love this place."

"I do," she said softly, turning a circle, taking in the beauty of the area. It was filled with birdsong and the sound of the ocean off in the distance and the wheeze of her father's labored breathing.

"Gracie…" The gravity in his voice scared her. Her eyes met his, and they were full of sorrow. "I'm sorry you suffered because of me. You and your mother were the loves of my life. Don't ever doubt that. Don't ever think I didn't love you or want to come back for you."

"How can I not?" she asked so choked by emotion she could only whisper.

Moisture shimmered in his eyes and he sadly shook his head. "There are some things I simply can't share with you, sweetheart. I know this leaves you with unanswered questions, but it's for your own good that you don't know the answers."

"Papa—"

He cut her off with a lift of his trembling fingers. "Please, Grace, if you have any faith left in me, trust me that it's an act of love for you that keeps me silent."

She didn't know what to make of that, but she believed him. Despite her anger and feeling betrayed by the man she loved most in the world, she believed her father was trying to protect her. But from what?

"I bought the house here for you and your mother," he said, ending with a weak cough and deep grimace. "The minute I saw it, I knew she would love it. And when I found this place," he said, gesturing with a frail hand toward the butterfly covered shrubs and evergreen trees and then out toward a tide pool in the distance and far beyond that to the ocean, "I knew you and I would have the best

days here together watching butterflies and birds and wading in the tide pool with the fish and walking the ocean shore hunting for treasures."

Moisture welled up in her eyes and all she could do was nod. Those would have been the best days for sure.

"Those were my plans, Gracie. This was where I was bringing you when…" Grief washed over his face, leaving behind a gray stain. "…when the accident changed our lives."

So this was the surprise he'd planned for them. This is where they'd been heading until the storm sank their boat. She couldn't speak around the lump in her throat.

Her continued silence left plenty of space for her father to explain, if he could, what had happened after the accident, when he'd sailed away and never returned, but he remained silent too. She didn't know if he simply needed to rest or if he was going to leave her forever without answers.

Finally he said, "After the accident I was mad with grief. I thought a good sail might clear my head and help me be the kind of father you deserved. I knew you'd be well taken care of by your grandfather, so I headed for Maine with my crew. I'd planned to return in a couple of weeks. But we barely made it out of the harbor before I was hauled off my ship and dumped in a prison cell. I wasn't permitted any form of contact." Something angry burned in his eyes and his fists clenched.

"I was told you were lost at sea and presumed dead. You must have learned at some point I'd been told you were dead, did you not?" she asked, unable to stifle her pain.

His jaw clenched and he stared out toward the tide pool, his anger seeming to reach the ocean. "Not until it was too late. That's all I'm going to say about it. I don't expect you to forgive me, but I can never express how sorry I am for that."

"No, I'm sure you can't," she said, agitated with him, with the whole heartbreaking mess.

Her comment broke their conversation and created another long

silence.

But then her father released a soft laugh. “You were… always such a spirited girl,” he said, growing more winded and wincing in discomfort. “You shocked your mother and me at least… once a day with your… antics and questions.” A small chuckle bubbled in his throat. “I adored every minute I had… with you.” His eyes, yellowed now with illness, were filled with adoration. “You’ve become a beautiful… young lady, Gracie. I wish your mother… could see you now.” He looked down at his gnarled hands for a moment and then back at her. “Do you remember… how we used to go out… at night and look at… the stars?”

The memory came vividly to life. She and her parents would lie on a blanket under the night sky filled with stars. Her father would point out constellations and tell story after story about the stars. He’d told her that some of the brightest stars were the souls of heroes who’d died and gone to heaven or of deceased parents who were watching over their children. He’d said the Milky Way was created by a young girl in Africa who was so lonely she threw glowing embers into the dark sky to light the way for visitors. Grace had been captivated by that story. Her father had told her if she ever felt lonely or missed him when he was away, she should look at the stars and know he was right there beneath them with her and her mother. Grace had worried that he would get lost because the ocean was so big, but he’d told her that sailors could always find their way home just by reading the stars.

“I remember those nights,” she said softly. There were so many heartwarming memories, so many precious moments, and so much heartache. “They were some of the best moments of my life.”

“Mine too,” her father replied, and after a gasping pause, “Gracie, all I’ve ever wanted in my life was to… protect you.”

She didn’t know what to say, didn’t know what to think. “What did you need to protect me from, Papa?”

Silence reigned while her father struggled to catch his breath. But he couldn’t. His breathing grew shallow and his face turned

sheet-white.

Grace knew it had cost him too much to bring her here. Seeing him gasp and grimace and fight to remain upright was her undoing. “We should get you back, Papa. I’ll go fetch the captain to help get you to the house.”

“No,” he said, reaching for her. “I want… to stay… here.” She hesitated, but he wiggled his hand at her, his arm drooping from the effort of holding it out to her. She took his hand, and he gave a weak tug that pulled her in. “Come here, sweetheart.”

He was shaking so fiercely that she wondered if he needed assistance to keep from lurching sideways and tumbling off the rock. She moved in and found herself pulled into his trembling arms, a place she hadn’t been since she was ten years old. Those arms, once so strong and powerful, arms that had held her up and kept her safe, that had wrapped her in a circle of love, were now weak and frail—but still filled with love.

“You were… and always will be… my world, Gracie.” His voice was graveled and shaky and barely audible, but his words rang through Grace like church bells as he hugged her. His arms fell away, and he sagged deep into the rock crevice. His gaze lifted to the vast expanse of robin’s egg blue sky above them. Discomfort stamped every crease of his face, but there was a light in his eyes Grace hadn’t seen since she was a girl and he was a man full of life. Whatever this outing had cost him, it seemed to have settled something inside him because his whole body seemed to let go as he whispered, “I’m glad I could show you… my sanctuary.”

Chapter Nineteen



Leo watched Grace emerge from a cluster of wax myrtle and magnolia trees, her face ashen, her eyes unseeing, her gait uneven as she walked along the path toward the beach.

She was alone…

His chest cramped so hard it squeezed the breath from his lungs.

She was *alone*…

He moved forward, his legs seeming to function better than his mind that was stuck in a ditch of denial. Thomas couldn't be gone. Not yet.

But Grace's blank stare told him otherwise.

He intercepted her where the lawn met the beach. He didn't ask questions because he wasn't ready to hear the truth. But when he reached for her, she staggered back a step and looked at him, her gaze wary and unfocused.

"My father is dead," she said, her voice eerily calm, her gaze fixed on the horizon behind Leo.

The slight hope that he'd been wrong whooshed out with his breath.

"Papa just looked up at the sky and…" She shook her head as if to shake herself from a dream. "One second he was telling me about his sanctuary, and the next he was… gone."

Grief clamped down so hard on Leo's chest, he could barely breathe. "I'm so sorry."

As if he'd struck her with a cattle prod, her gaze shot to his,

finally alive and snapping with anger. “You should be,” she said, her voice low and filled with condemnation. “You knew he was going to die. You knew that!” she said, her voice shaking with accusation and fury. “And yet you brought me here to go through it again.”

“Grace…”

He reached for her, but she wrenched away, tears rimming her eyes. “How could you be so cruel?”

He hadn’t meant to be cruel.

“Why couldn’t you have brought me here years ago when I could have spent those years with my father?”

Her pain seemed to radiate outward in turbulent waves of anger and heartbreak that knocked him back on his heels.

“We had so little time—” A pain-filled sob shattered her declaration—and Leo’s heart. She clamped her lips together and shook her head as if she couldn’t bear any more.

And she couldn’t. He could see it in her eyes.

He could see her breaking down inch by inch, her body shaking as she tried and failed to hold herself together. She clapped her hand over her mouth, but a wrenching sob burst from her throat. And then another. And then she fell apart in his arms while he bit a hole in his cheek and suppressed his own grief and regret. He hadn’t meant to be cruel. But for the second time in his life, his good intentions had caused brutal damage and heartache for someone he cared about.

Seabirds screeched along the shore, hunting for their lunch. The distant clanging of ropes against *Destiny*’s masts sounded like the death knell of a church bell.

Thomas Covington was dead.

Grace Covington was broken.

Leo Sullivan was an idiot.

For long, heart-wrenching moments they were lost in the sounds of Indigo Isle and their own pain.

“This is the second time I’ve lost him,” she said through her

tears.

Her pain sliced through Leo, filleted him, left him bleeding regret. He should never have brought her here. He should never have stepped into the middle of another family's troubles when he'd caused so much destruction in his own.

And though he wanted to say as much, to apologize, to express his regret, to ask her forgiveness, he kept his mouth shut. He'd done enough damage. So he stood there like a pylon on a harbor pier, giving her something to hold onto as waves of grief slammed over them.

Slowly, her shaking subsided, and she seemed to take hold of herself breath by breath.

He wanted to hold her, to remain standing together against their shared heartache, but she wrenched herself from his arms and stepped away.

With her eyes wet and red and filled with despair, she looked up at him. "How am I going to tell Willy?" Another wave of tears flooded her eyes, but she straightened her spine and wiped her face with her fingers.

He retrieved a clean handkerchief from his trouser pocket and offered it to her.

She accepted it but kept it clenched in her fist. "I was barely older than Willy when—" Her lips compressed, a breathy sob escaped her, and she buried her face in the handkerchief. "I can't do this."

"I'll tell him." Leo cupped her arms and urged her to look at him. When their eyes met, he didn't try to hide his own pain and regret and apology. "I can do this alone, Grace."

She shook her head. "We need to do this together. Willy is going to need both of us."

He nodded because it was true.

She pulled away and faced the shore, gazing far out to the horizon. "I want to go home," she said, her voice homesick and filled with heartache. "But I can't leave things undone, and Willy

needs time before… before he's forced to leave his home."

She wept again then, quietly, and alone. She was doing what she had to do to pull herself together—for Willy.

Leo understood because he was doing the same. He had just lost a dear friend and the closest thing he had to a father since his time with Cyrus who'd given him and Benny a home. Leo was heartbroken for Grace and Willy. And he was drowning in regret for being the cause of her pain.

She had grieved the death of her father once. To be forced to do it again was beyond cruel.

Long minutes passed while they stood silently beside each other, each of them lost in their private pain. Finally, knowing he couldn't delay the inevitable any longer, Leo exhaled a lungful of pent-up sorrow. "Grace," he said quietly, drawing her away from her private thoughts. "If you're ready, I'll have Fogg bring your father to the house while we tell Willy."

WILLY WAS on the porch when they returned to the house. The boy's cheeks were sun-kissed from a morning spent playing outside, and his eyes were alive with the curiosity and boundless energy of childhood. He sat on the wooden slats of the porch floor fiddling with what appeared to be a makeshift boat with a clamshell hull and a mast made of sticks and an old piece of cloth. Leo would have liked nothing better than to sit and help Willy fashion a model boat that would float.

Instead, he was about to sink Willy's entire world.

The boy's face lit up at their approach. "Cap'n Sullivan, come see my schooner!"

Leo tried and failed to smile. He gave Fogg, who was sitting on the porch with two other crew members, a slow shake of his head to indicate Thomas wasn't coming back. Grief washed over Fogg's face and he nodded to let Leo know he would bring their former

captain home.

After Fogg and the men left the porch, Leo sat near Willy on the floor and rested his booted feet on the bottom step of the stairs. He wasn't trying to be casual or to be Willy's friend. He was positioning himself to catch the boy when his world fell apart.

Grace perched on the edge of a wicker armchair, her hands clasped tightly on her lap, an expression of forced calm on her face, but her eyes were pools of swirling pain.

"Where's Papa?" Willy asked, glancing toward the path that Grace had taken with her father earlier that morning.

Leo exchanged a look with Grace, but before he could break the news to Willy, Grace gave a small shake of her head to stop him.

"Willy," she said softly, "I took the most beautiful walk with our father this morning."

A smile touched Willy's boyish face, but he seemed more interested in his boat. Clad only in a pair of cut off trousers, his ribs jutting out, Willy appeared smaller than ever. His bony shoulders were golden from the sun, and his bare feet were speckled with sand. He was an adventurous boy making the most of his day—a day that would drop a heavy weight on his small shoulders.

"Papa and I were looking at the sky, and it was so blue and so vast," she continued, "I couldn't tell where the ocean ended and the sky began."

Willy wrinkled his nose and glanced at Leo as if sharing a private joke. "Anyone can tell the difference," he said matter-of-factly.

"I suppose you're right," she said softly. "But they were both so spectacular, Willy. Papa sat on a large rock and spent a long time looking at the ocean."

"That's his favorite place to sit and tell his sea stories," Willy said, letting Grace know that her little brother had spent time there with their father.

She bit her lip and gave a small nod as if acknowledging Willy's comment, but Leo knew she was working to keep her composure.

After a minute, she continued. “Our father told me a different story today, Willy. One that spoke of his deep love for his children and that he wanted us to be together and happy.”

“We are together,” Willy said.

“And I’m very happy about that.” Her smile wobbled. She straightened her spine. “I hope you are, too, Willy.”

“’Course,” he said, but his attention remained on his boat.

“Have you seen the butterflies in the sanctuary?” she asked. Whether she was stalling or intentionally trying to get Willy’s attention, Leo couldn’t tell, but he let Grace handle things.

“Aye. Sometimes they’re as thick as mosquitos,” he said.

“Well, they were magnificent today. They seemed to dance around Papa and me, showing off their beautiful wings and creating a curtain of rippling color just for us. Papa loved it. He just leaned back in the nook of his favorite rock and enjoyed every minute of their dance. While we watched them, the ocean waves rolling ashore sounded like a lullaby… ah-shhh… ah-shhh…” she said, her voice soft and dreamy. “Papa closed his eyes and—” Her voice broke and it took her a second to recover. “He let the ocean lull him to sleep.”

Willy glanced up, a grin on his face. “Is he still sleeping out there on his rock?”

Grace nodded but couldn’t speak. Leo could see it was beyond her to say another single word. It was time for him to take Willy the rest of the way.

He reached out and clasped the boy’s shoulder to get his attention. “Your father is gone, Willy. He left peacefully and will no longer suffer.”

Confusion and fear flooded Willy’s face. “He’s just sleeping on his rock.”

Leo swallowed hard and gave a solemn shake of his head.

“Sure he is,” Willy said. “He falls asleep out there all the time. I’ll go get him!” With that Willy bounded off the porch, shot across the boardwalk, and was off down the path, clearly driven by fear

and a need to prove them wrong.

Leo leapt to his feet and went after the boy, but Willy was fast. Halfway up the path, Leo caught up to him—and to Fogg and two other crew members who were carrying Thomas's body home.

"Papaaaa!"

Willy's screech of denial tore through the forest, startling birds and raising the hair on Leo's neck.

The boy slammed into the men, causing the group to stumble.

"Papa!" Willy reached for his father, grasping at his coat, begging him to wake up. Buttons from Thomas's coat flew, and the men struggled to keep Thomas in their arms.

"Papa, please wake up!" Willy cried, his desperate plea shattering Leo's composure.

He caught the boy from behind and swept him up into his arms.

Willy howled and fought to return to his father, striking Leo's shoulders, and sobbing. The boy was strong, but Leo was stronger—and he was the rock Willy needed when the truth sank in and the boy collapsed in Leo's arms. As Willy sobbed, his small body wracked with grief, Leo walked behind his men as they made their way to the house. Grace met them at the trailhead and embraced them, the three of them clinging to each other in their shared heartbreak.

Leo had known Thomas's death would be difficult for him, but he had far underestimated how Grace and Willy's grief would shatter him.

Chapter Twenty



Everything came crashing down on Grace: the loss of her father, her unresolved issues with his abandonment, Willy's heart-wrenching grief, her complicated feelings toward Captain Sullivan, and the weight of handling her father's funeral and his estate when she barely knew the man.

The house was a constant swarm of people: Letta and her grown daughter that Grace hadn't known existed took care of things in the house. Captain Sullivan and his crew whose long faces were a constant reminder that they had spent more time with her father during the last twelve years than she had seemed to be in constant movement attending to things her dulled senses couldn't comprehend. Willy wandered among the men and through the house like a ghost. He would stand at the window for hours, as he was doing now, looking out at the path that led through a copse of trees to the butterfly sanctuary, waiting with hope in his eyes and an innocent belief that their father would come walking down that path and back into his life.

But their father was gone. This time forever. And Willy would have to learn to live with the vast canyon of grief in his chest because, as Grace knew too well, it was never going away.

And that made her angry. If her father hadn't waited until he was nearing his final breath to bring his children together, she and Willy would have had years to bond and become a family—and that might have helped Willy not feel so alone now. Because he did. She

could see the bereft glaze in his eyes, the way he seemed to look through everyone and everything.

In desperate need of air and a moment of quiet, she stepped onto the porch and let her gaze wander the beach. She couldn't bear to look at the path that had led to her father's death. Clenching the estate papers in her hand that the lawyer had asked Captain Sullivan to present to her at the appropriate time, which was apparently today, she felt overwhelmed by despair and anger. She hadn't a clue what to do with the house or her father's possessions. The only things that were clear cut were the personal items and year's pay that he'd left for Letta, and the house in Crane Landing, that Grace didn't know he owned, that now belonged to Captain Sullivan. Everything else had been left to Grace and Willy.

But all they wanted was their father.

"You were so foolish, Papa!" she said to the ocean, feeling her insides churning like the surf that was eating and spitting out sand. "I don't want your house or your possessions."

"Easy now, miss. I know you're in a rough spot, shouting into the mist right now, but take care. The dead can hear."

She spun around and saw Fogg sitting in her father's chair at the end of the porch. "If that were true then my father would have heard me begging him to come home."

Fogg winced. "But he wasn't dead, miss."

"No, he wasn't. He was selfish and irresponsible and… and just cruel to abandon me."

The kindness in Fogg's eyes evaporated. "Careful now. I know y' be in hot haste to judge him. But that's not true."

"No?" she asked, her question thrown out like a challenge.

"There be things y' don't know—"

"Exactly!" she said, slapping the packet of papers against her open palm. "And now I'll never know because my father went to his grave a coward."

Fury burst across Fogg's face and he leapt to his feet. "I'll not abide that talk about Captain Thomas from anyone, including you,

miss. That man was the kindest most honorable man I knew, and every crew member who ever served under his leadership would say the same. And there is also no man walking this earth who loved his children more than he did."

"Then why didn't he come back for me?" she asked, her tone just as furious as his.

"Because your grandfather had him tossed into prison!" Fogg bellowed, his face red with outrage.

"What?" she asked in disbelief. "That can't be true."

"Well, it is. Your grandfather blamed your father for the accident that killed your mother and grandmother."

"But it wasn't his fault… Was it?"

Fogg sighed. "I don't know. But I do know that when your father got out of prison, he headed to fetch you. Your grandfather had him nabbed and sent straight back to prison only it was the worst, filthiest, darkest hole you could imagine. He told your father the only way he would ever see daylight again was to stay away from Fairview and never contact you."

She shook her head unable to believe such a thing of her grandfather, and yet a cold sense of dread streamed through her because she knew her grandfather had hated her father after the accident. "Grandfather thought Papa died at sea."

Fogg's brows shifted down. "Not true. I was Thomas's first mate when all of this happened. I was there. It be your grandfather's pull that put Thomas in jail, kept him from coming back t' you, and fabricated the whale's tale that your father was dead. If you want t' place blame, then you lay it at your grandfather's feet," Fogg said. But he wasn't done. Red-faced and plumped up like an angry rooster, he closed the distance between them. "You were your father's world, and he would have fought for you regardless of your grandfather's threats, but a nasty illness got hold of him and he nearly died. He'd lost just about everything by then. And he learnt he had a newborn son he needed to look after because the boy's mother had died giving birth to 'im. He couldn't do that from

prison, which is right where your grandfather promised to send him should he show his face at Fairview again. And your father was deeply worried for Willy's safety and wellbeing if he crossed your grandfather."

She shook her head in denial even as the truth rolled in and flooded her mind like high tide.

"Miss, your father knew your grandfather would provide a good, safe life for you, better than Thomas himself could do. And so to protect Willy and to give you the best life possible, your father let you go. But he never stopped loving or caring about you. Many a time we anchored offshore and sent a messenger to the Old Anchor Inn for news of you. Our friend Myles has been keepin' track of you for years now."

The ground was spinning beneath her. Nothing made sense. If her father had been checking up on her all those years, while she had been grieving and dreaming and praying for his return, but her grandfather's vindictive anger was what had kept them apart… well, she couldn't begin to put into words what that would mean.

She rubbed her throbbing temples, trying to keep her balance, but her world spun completely off its axis and she dropped into a chair.

Fogg was saying something that she couldn't understand, and then he was whooshing past her and entering the house, and then the captain was at her side asking if she was all right.

And she wasn't. Not at all.

Her father had come back for her. He hadn't abandoned her.

Her *grandfather* had betrayed her.

The powerful Joseph Fairview had launched his grief and anger like a bayonet at her father—and that spear had cut through her too.

She shifted her gaze to the captain who was kneeling beside her. "You and Fogg knew all of this when you brought me here, didn't you? You've known the whole story all along."

He nodded, his eyes dark with apology.

“How could you keep all of this from me?” she whispered. “You let me think my father was a callous, selfish man who deserted me. You knew the truth and yet…” A surge of emotion clogged her throat. “We had so little time and I wasted it on anger.”

“Grace,” he said softly, “your father knew how deeply it would hurt you to learn the truth about your grandfather, and so he kept it from you because he loved you. He made us swear to keep his secret. You were never supposed to know.” The captain slipped his warm palm over her fist that was clenched around the estate papers. “It wasn’t my place to share any of this with you. And Fogg shouldn’t have either. But just the same, I’m sorry for the part I’ve played in your heartache.”

Rage and regret and heart-rending pain crashed together like storm waves against the rocks. She couldn’t talk. She couldn’t think. She couldn’t be here in this place another minute. Thrusting the estate papers into the captain’s hands, she lurched to her feet. “You and Fogg apparently knew everything about my father so you can handle his funeral and his estate.”

With that, she stumbled down the porch steps and crossed the lawn to the wooded path, but instead of heading toward the butterfly sanctuary, a place she could never again visit, she took a less traveled path that led to a small pond of water fed by a shallow creek. The sight of the river otter that Willy had wanted to show their father made her cry.

She couldn’t stay here. But how could she go back to Philadelphia—to the man who had stolen the one person in her life she loved most?

THREE DAYS. That’s how long it had taken for her, with the captain handling most of the details, to bury her father and decide how to secure his house—now her and Willy’s house. They decided that Letta would remain at the house and continue to care for it until

Grace and Willy determined what to do with it. She didn't want it. That dream of sharing the beautiful island home with her parents was dead.

They'd buried her father in his secret sanctuary. For Grace, returning to the place she'd sworn to never revisit was a bittersweet experience. It was the place she had finally reconnected with her father and the place where she'd had to say goodbye to him for the last time.

Willy cried of course, but he said again and again how their father would be happy sleeping here in his favorite place. He had climbed up on the rock to show Grace how he used to sit beside their father when they would spend time in the sanctuary. Then he walked her out to the tide pool and pointed out a variety of colorful fish swimming in the shallows, barely eighteen inches at its deepest point but a lovely refuge for the fish.

Sand dunes protected the tide pool from the ocean's constant push of waves at all but high tide, but she could see the vast body of water in the distance and hear its song on the wind.

Being here with Willy took her back to the days she'd spent on the banks of the river with their father and how they would wade into the water, shoes and all, and create a ruckus with their splashing and frolicking.

At the captain's gentle suggestion, they headed back to the house with slow steps, but halfway there, Willy redirected them into a grouping of live oak with a marsh on the other side.

He pointed to the wispy grasses. "Sometimes the water was high enough out here that Papa would take me in his rowboat to look for 'gators." With wide eyes, the boy looked up at Grace and the captain who'd stood solidly at their side, his strong arms ready to support them should they need it. "Once we saw one as big as our boat."

"Were you scared?" It was all Grace could think to ask. Because she knew he was scared of facing the world without the strength and security of their father.

“A little,” he said. For a long moment, the boy gazed across the marsh as if locking those memories deep inside, then his shoulders straightened, and he turned away. “I’m ready now.”

She knew his brave face hid a world of pain, and it wrenched her heart because there was nothing she could do to ease his heartache. She wanted to pull Willy into her arms and comfort him, but the boy was doing his best to be a man in the company of the captain and his crew. So she stepped aside as the captain put a hand on Willy’s shoulder. They started talking about ‘gators as they returned to the path and walked to the house for the last time.

All Willy’s possessions were packed and waiting to be loaded onto the *Destiny* now. She’d helped him pack his things the day before while the captain and some of his crew had gone to Charleston. Captain Sullivan had wanted to see his sister again before leaving the area. But it wasn’t just Willy’s things that they’d packed. It was also what Willy called their father’s treasures.

On his nightstand sat a small crate made from sticks and twine that contained a pink conch shell, a piece of white coral, and a dried starfish that Willy said he’d given to their father on different occasions. A small collection of oddly shaped stones, a shark’s tooth, and two monarch butterflies that had stopped fluttering their wings long ago sat atop the dresser. That her father had kept those gifts from his son was heartwarming but not unexpected because his love for Willy had been real and palpable.

But Grace was unprepared for the gut punch of emotion when she discovered the physical evidence of her father’s love for her. Atop the chest of drawers near the window facing the ocean was the framed photograph of her mother, with a lock of hair from Grace’s first haircut tucked inside. Her father had once kept it in his quarters aboard his ship, but had apparently brought it with him to the home he’d hoped to share with Grace and her mother. Lying beside the frame was the last picture she’d ever drawn for him, for his birthday, the last one they’d ever celebrated together.

Her father hadn’t forgotten her.

Together, she and Willy carefully and lovingly boxed up the treasures to be transported to the ship.

Then, as the day was ending and they were waiting for Captain Sullivan to bring the rowboat to fetch them, she and Willy had taken a final walk on the beach.

They'd each picked up a memento to remember the feel of the warm sand and the sound of the seabirds and evening frogs and the chirping and twittering songs of the wrens and chickadees and mockingbirds that made their homes in the red cedars and loblolly pines, and the imagined footprints of their father who had once held their hands and introduced them to the natural wonders of their world.

As she spied the captain returning with the rowboat, she hurried back to her father's room. The quilted lap robe he'd been using had fallen on the floor beside the bed. She bundled it in her arms and stuffed it in a pillowcase, then tucked that in her satchel before hurrying outside to where Willy and the captain were waiting.

As the captain rowed the boat away from shore, and the house grew smaller in the distance, Grace drew her little brother into her arms and silently promised to keep him safe, to give him a good home, to help him through his grief, and to let him know every day that their father had loved him.

He'd loved her too—but her grandfather in his need for vengeance had selfishly cut that love from her life.

Now, because she had no other choice, she was heading back to Fairview, back to face the man who had given her everything and had taken away the only thing that mattered, back to a fiancé who might no longer wish to marry her, who might not welcome Willy into their new marriage.

Every oar stroke was carrying her away from the island and closer to a world she wanted to escape.

Chapter Twenty-One



Captain Sullivan and the crew kept Willy busy that evening until he'd fallen asleep on deck. The captain had carried her little brother to a berth in the crew's quarters where the captain would also sleep while Grace occupied his cabin.

He returned moments later and joined her by the railing where she stood watching the stars.

She said nothing. She was too empty.

As if he understood her inability to make conversation, he leaned his forearms on the railing and gazed into the darkness with her. Minutes passed with only the sound of the snapping sails, the soft roar of the ocean, and the beat of her own aching heart. She didn't realize she was weeping until the captain pulled her into his arms.

He was being too familiar, she knew that, but she no longer cared. Her father was really gone, forever, and she'd lost her grandfather too. They had been the foundation of her world, and now everything had crumbled beneath her feet. She needed something, or someone, to hold onto.

The captain didn't offer words of solace because there weren't any words that would soothe her grief. He just held her in the warmth of his strong arms while *Destiny* rocked them both.

She could hear the soft shuffling sound of feet moving about the deck here and there while the crew did their jobs, but no one approached.

For a long while she remained in his arms, the two of them connected in their heartache. Slowly, she eased back to see his face.

"My father should not have asked so much of you," she said quietly. "He put your freedom in jeopardy and placed a heavy burden on your conscience."

"He didn't ask me to kidnap you. That was my own poor decision."

"But he did ask you to fetch me and to keep his secrets that shouldn't have been yours to carry."

"I would have carried more for him," the captain said.

She believed him. It was painfully apparent that the captain had cared deeply for her father.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "You lost someone, too, and I've been so focused on my own heartache and Willy's grief that I hadn't considered your loss, or that your crew is grieving too." Sighing, she slipped from his arms and stood beside him, holding onto the rail to keep herself steady on her feet and safely on deck. The ocean could send a wave crashing across the deck at any second, just like life, that could wash a body into the chilling abyss. For Willy's sake, she needed to keep her feet under her and carry on. But how to do that when facing her grandfather would capsize her again as soon as she stepped foot in Philadelphia. Thinking about it made her head throb and enflamed her anger and outrage.

"Captain, will you play your guitar for me?" she asked, desperate to escape her maddening thoughts.

He arched a brow. "I thought you'd want to retire."

"Not yet." Sighing, she met his eyes. "I would be grateful for a few minutes of your beautiful music."

"Of course. Let me fetch it."

A few minutes later, they settled themselves on plump burlap sacks in an area on deck that was sheltered from the brunt of the wind. "This makes for a comfy seat," she said, tucking her skirt around her legs.

"The bags are filled with cotton for the textile mill in Crane

Landing," he said, eliciting several questions from her about the textile mill.

And so it went for several minutes while she inquired about the mill and the town in which her father and Willy had lived—without her.

The way the captain talked about his home made her wish for one daring moment that she could go there with him, could meet his friends, and see all the lovely sights she could only imagine. Then she thought of Fairview… of the strict order of each day, of her chafing code of expected behavior, of the wealthy but empty home she shared with her grandfather. The only warmth that touched her heart now was when she thought of Saul.

"Is there anything particular you'd like to hear," the captain asked, pulling her from a place she wanted to escape.

She sighed and met his eyes. "Anything that won't make me cry."

He smiled.

She smiled back, her heart soothed just looking at him.

"How about this?" he asked, his fingers plucking strings as he began a lively tune she didn't recognize but that made her want to tap her toes.

For a half hour the captain, with his beautiful hands and rich baritone voice, carried her away from her worries. He made her laugh. He made her sigh. And he made her swoon when he leaned in and kissed her forehead while the final chord of a ballad resonated from his guitar. She ached to raise her chin, to feel his lips against her own, to be cradled in his arms like his beloved guitar…. But she was going home, back to Fairview, back to her fiancé—if he would have her—and so she stood on wobbly legs and shook out her skirt.

"Thank you for your kindness, Captain."

As he rose to his feet, she stepped back, away from temptation. She was too vulnerable. Her emotions were too raw to remain on deck under the stars with this man who made her long for a place

she couldn't go and a life she couldn't have.

FOR THE MOST PART, Grace spent the next day of their sail on deck watching Willy help with deck duties, for which she was immensely thankful. Although Willy had sailed many times with their father, he hung on the crew's every word, and he appeared as intrigued as Grace was by the navigational instruments and the massive sails billowing above them.

She made sure that Willy ate his supper, that he wanted to continue to bunk with the captain and the crew, and that he hadn't fallen overboard. He hadn't of course but he had disappeared, and she hadn't seen him for nearly half an hour after supper.

She spent several minutes searching for the boy, and finally found him on the deck crouched behind several large boxes of cargo, sobbing as if the world were ending—and for a little boy who'd just lost the father he adored, it must surely feel that way.

His tears didn't surprise Grace. She'd been expecting more emotion from him. Still, seeing her brother falling apart broke her heart.

"I miss him too," she said, sitting beside him.

He continued to sob.

She slipped her arm around him to let him know he had a safe place to dock, and someone to hold him during the storms in his life. Somehow that didn't seem to be enough. Understanding how devastated and broken he was—because she had lived through that same heartbreak and was now experiencing that loss again—she knew words wouldn't ease his pain.

"I'll be right back, Willy." She got to her feet and rushed below to her cabin. Moments later she was back and settling in beside her little brother who was now quietly looking into an endless ocean. "I have something for you."

Confusion crossed his tearstained face.

“This was a gift from Papa,” she said, dangling the velvet bag, hoping to elicit Willy’s curiosity.

It worked. He dragged his forearm under his nose and gave the bag his full attention.

“What is it?” he asked, his voice still clogged with tears.

“When I was about your age, Papa had gone on a long voyage,” she said, telling a story that would hopefully draw Willy’s mind away from their loss. “Do you know where Europe is?”

He shook his head to indicate he did not.

“Well, it’s all the way across the ocean. It took an awfully long time for Papa to sail there and back. The day he finally returned to Fairview—that’s where we lived—he had this bag tucked inside his shirt.”

A watery smile lifted Willy’s mouth. “That’s where he hides things.”

“I know. Papa was good at hiding surprises there,” she said, returning his smile. “He gave me three chances to guess what was in this bag.” She jiggled the bag again.

“What’s in it?” Willy asked again.

“Guess.”

He shrugged. “A hair ribbon for you?”

She shook her head and placed the sack in the palm of his hand.

“Whoa, it’s heavy.”

“So definitely not a hair ribbon.”

He snickered. “A rock?”

“Does it feel like a rock?”

As his fingers massaged the bag, a furrow formed between his eyebrows. “A pipe?”

She shook her head. “You’re out of guesses.” Then with a grin, she confessed that she hadn’t been able to guess the contents either. “Go ahead and open it.”

Willy opened the sack and pulled out the kaleidoscope, but she could see by the baffled look on his face that he had no idea what he was holding.

“It’s a kaleidoscope,” she told him, then showed him how to hold it up to his eye.

He did, and his mouth rounded.

“Rotate the barrel.”

He did, and he inhaled in surprised wonder.

His reaction whisked her back to her first look through the scope and the flood of pleasure the colorful, changing images elicited in her.

In that moment, she thought of Saul and how he would lift the scope to his eye and marvel at what he saw, of how frantic he’d been when Harwood had stolen the scope, and how certain he’d been of their path home in the midst of a blinding snowstorm. He’d been correct of course, but had she followed him, she would have never experienced these other colors in her life. Because if she had returned home, the captain wouldn’t have been able to wrest her from Fairview or her grandfather’s powerful protection.

For a long time Willy pressed his eye to the scope, utterly enthralled. Finally he lowered it to his lap and gaped at her. “How does this work?”

She opened the scope. They examined the items inside, lingering over each treasured piece as she shared the story behind each one and how the pieces created shapes and colors in the angled mirrors at the end of the scope. “This is a pearl from my mother’s necklace,” she said. “I wasn’t supposed to play with Mama’s jewelry, but I did, and I broke it of course. You should have seen the mess. Nearly a hundred small pearls scattered across the floor like marbles.”

Willy visibly cringed as if he were the one in trouble.

“After Mama died, I found one of the pearls from her necklace in a far corner of her bedroom. I vowed to keep it forever, so I put the pearl in my kaleidoscope for safekeeping.”

“That was smart,” Willy said.

A sad smile tipped her lips. “I thought so.” She fingered a tiny scrap of blue ribbon. “This is from my grandmother’s favorite hat, and this little piece of gold chain is from my grandfather’s pocket

watch."

For a moment, she considered throwing the chain into the ocean, but the thought made her want to weep. She had scooped the chain fragment off the stable floor after a fun round of roughhousing with her grandfather. She'd climbed onto his back, and he'd galloped her all the way through the house, through the kitchen and parlor and dining room, and up the stairs through every single bedroom, and then down again through the foyer and right out to the stables where he collapsed in a mound of hay. When Grace had rolled off in a breathless fit of laughter, her dress snagged on his watch. His expensive watch chain snapped into pieces, and he didn't care a whit. He just started tickling her.

Their boisterous laughter drew Saul into the stables. Without a second's hesitation, her grandfather pulled Saul into their raging tickling match, the three of them laughing and scattering hay all across the stable.

That was the man she'd loved—the man her grandfather had been before the boating accident that had left all of them broken.

"Is that a stone?" Willy asked, pointing to a gray pebble.

"Yes. It's from the riverbank where Papa used to take us for picnics when my Mama was alive."

Willy furrowed his brows and seemed to consider her comment for a moment. "Neither of us has a mother."

"Not one that's living," she replied. "But we do have mothers and we do have a father, all of whom loved us very much." She slipped her hand into her skirt pocket and pulled out a broken piece of iridescent clam shell. "I picked this up during our last walk on the beach. I'm going to put it in the kaleidoscope to remind me of the island and my time with you and Papa." She added the shell to the bits and fragments of her life that she'd kept in the scope. "We can share this gift from Papa," she said to her little brother. "And you can add whatever you like to help create new colors and images."

"I can?" he asked. At her nod, he reached into his pocket and

pulled out a silver button. “It’s from Papa’s coat.” At her questioning gaze, he said, “They fell off when—” He stopped, and his eyes beaded with tears. “I found it on the path to Papa’s sanctuary.”

Ah, now she understood. Captain Sullivan had told her of Willy’s howling grief when he’d seen his father’s body being carried back from the sanctuary. Grace recalled the heartbreaking sight of the captain carrying Willy down the path to her waiting arms. To think that Willy had gone back there alone, that he’d walked that path and found the button and remembered the moment it had popped off their father’s coat, dropped a hundred-pound weight on her chest.

“I don’t have anything of my mother’s,” he said.

Grace stroked his hair off his forehead. “Perhaps not for our kaleidoscope, Willy, but Letta says you have your mother’s eyes.”

His gaze met hers. “I do?” he asked, a touch of wonder crossing his face.

She nodded. “Papa said so too.”

Willy grinned. “Well I can’t put my eye in the scope.”

Grace smiled. “No, Willy, but you can look in the scope with your eyes that are so like your mother’s eyes, and see all the lost pieces of our lives tumbling together to create something beautiful. Life can be shattered by many things, but those broken pieces can create something magnificent, like the images in our kaleidoscope.”

As Willy raised the scope to his eye to admire the ever-changing conglomeration of their combined treasures, Grace realized then that her life was a collection of special moments, however brief, that created a collage of beauty and love. And however broken she and Willy were at the moment, together they would gather the pieces of their shattered hearts and create a beautiful new life—at Crane Landing where her little brother had spent the majority of his young life with their father. That’s where his best memories would be… and where Willy needed to be. He had friends there who would help him heal and rebuild his life.

And she would build her own life there as well. She just had to convince Captain Sullivan of her plans.

Chapter Twenty-Two



It was late evening, after Grace had sent Willy off to bed, when she approached the captain. It felt like a lifetime ago that she'd woken and found herself in the captain's bed heading toward the most shocking revelation of her life.

And here she was just hours away from docking at the Port of Philadelphia.

The passing of every nautical mile seemed to tighten the vice clamping her chest. She had spent most of the day and evening mulling over her situation, knowing she couldn't return to a place that was no longer home.

Or to a fiancé who could only ever be a friend.

Or to a man she could never forgive.

She was being set free, but for Willy, who had lived a carefree life with their father, going to the Fairview estate would be like caging one of the beautiful butterflies from the island that would slowly wither and die in captivity. She could not do that to him.

Knowing her grandfather had hated her father enough to send him to the worst prison, she worried how he would treat Willy. Would Joseph Fairview see Willy as a charming little boy who was Grace's half-brother, or as the unwelcome son of a man he hated?

She needed to convince the captain to take her and Willy to Crane Landing. But it was complicated because she didn't know where they would live or how she could support them. Her father had left a small sum in his bank account, but the bulk of his money

had been invested in the house on Indigo Isle, which wouldn't help her unless she sold it, a decision that she and Willy would have to discuss and agree on. Her father's small cottage in Crane Landing now belonged to the captain who'd been living there since her father left for Indigo Isle with Willy. She certainly would not ask her grandfather for assistance because as soon as he knew her whereabouts he'd haul her right back to Fairview. So for the first time in her life she was on her own, and without the security of her grandfather's wealth.

As she approached the captain, she noticed that the crew was alive with heightened activity. They were scouring the ship, but for what? Barrels were rolled out and back, ropes were uncoiled and rewrapped. Bags were opened, emptied, refilled, and closed again. Her first thought was they had lost something necessary to their safe navigation. But it was the panicked look in the captain's eyes that sent a chill of foreboding down her spine.

"Is something amiss, Captain?" she asked, making her way to his side.

"Nothing for you to worry about," he said, barely sparing her a glance.

Surprised by his unusual disregard, she stood mute for a moment, trying to take in what was happening. Fogg strode by, tipped his hat to her, and continued on with two crew members following along. Despite the activity, every man was silent.

"Are we in danger, Captain?" she asked, dreading his answer. The thought of being in the grip of a dangerous storm, especially with Willy onboard, sent a wash of ice water through her veins.

Her question seemed to surprise the captain and shake him from his intense focus on his mission, whatever it was. "Not at all, Miss Covington."

"Then there isn't a storm on the horizon?"

"Sky is clear and the ocean is calm. I can assure you there's no storm approaching."

Her relief was audible in the outrush of her breath. "Thank

goodness. All this activity had me concerned. What's going on?"

"I lost something, and we're trying to find it," he said, returning to his work.

"Oh? Perhaps I can be of assistance?"

"No need," he said, dismissing her offer.

Shocked by his cool reply, she took a step back. "I apologize for interrupting, Captain. I'd only meant to offer my assistance, not to get in the way or to offend you."

"What?" He glanced up and stopped what he was doing, one end of a tarpaulin clutched in one hand.

"I hadn't meant for my inquiry to be intrusive."

For a moment, he said nothing, just stood gripping the tarp. Then, in one continuous motion, he dropped it and raised his hands to rake his windblown hair back. "I've lost my hair tie."

"Your hair tie?" she asked, bewildered. "You mean that worn leather string?" At his nod, she nearly laughed. But then she saw the distraught look in his eyes and knew that somehow the hair tie was important enough to him that he was turning his ship upside down in search of it. "Can you not get another one in the next port?" she asked.

He sank back against a large wooden crate like a deflating balloon. "It can't be replaced."

She didn't understand what was happening or why the loss of a string of old leather upset him so deeply, only that this man had lost something important. She could see it in his eyes, in the bereft expression on his face—a face that had been confident and determined… until now.

"It's either truly lost, or I left it on the island."

"Are we… will you turn back then?"

Slowly, his hands slid off the railing, and he turned to face her. "No." He raked his hair back again, revealing tired eyes. "We'll dock in Philadelphia before noon tomorrow as planned. I promised to take you home, and that's what I'll do."

Her heart sank, but she could see this wasn't the time to plead

her case with him. “Well, should you desire to go back to the island, I won’t mind the delay, Captain.”

A slight smile tipped his mouth but didn’t reach his eyes. “Thank you. But it’s too late.”

THE CLOSER THEY got to the Port of Philadelphia the tighter Leo gripped the ship’s wheel. This might be the last time he captained the *Destiny* or walked her deck as a free man. In three hours or less he would face Joseph Fairview and confess that he’d kidnapped the man’s granddaughter.

Leo didn’t expect Joseph Fairview’s understanding or forgiveness. What he’d done was criminal in the eyes of the law—and although wrong in his own eyes, something he’d simply had to do.

He didn’t regret reuniting Grace with her father, although he did regret the way he’d had to do it and the pain she had suffered. But Grace and her father had both experienced love and healing too. And now Grace and Willy had each other.

Leo had honored the dying wish of a man he’d respected and loved. Knowing that the reunion with Grace had brought Thomas peace in his final hours reaffirmed Leo’s belief that he’d made the right decision. He could live with his actions, however unconventional, and the repercussions to follow.

Thoughts moved through his head with the monotony of the waves rolling past *Destiny*’s hull. If Joseph Fairview carted him off to jail, Leo wouldn’t make it to Crane Landing to meet with Ashe. He’d been waiting over a year to reconnect with his brother because Ashe had been out of the country tending to his shipping business. To think they would finally have time to talk, to share their stories of what had happened after they were separated by their father’s reprehensible actions, was a dream come true for Leo. But he might have killed that dream with his own hands. He didn’t want the

reunion with his brother to happen from opposite sides of steel bars.

The sight of Grace walking toward him, her skirt swishing with each step, her hair being tossed by the breeze, was a warm beam of sun that cut through his dark thoughts.

“Hello, Captain,” she said, steadying herself with one hand against the binnacle, a look of concern furrowing her sandy brows. “How long before we reach the port?”

“Couple of hours,” he replied, feeling the noose tighten around his neck.

She seemed to consider that for a moment, her gaze turning inward as if searching for an answer to a dilemma. Then, releasing a hard sigh, she raised her beautiful eyes to his and said, “You can’t take me back.”

Confused, he studied her closely. “I gave you my word that I would return you to Fairview, unharmed, and I intend to live up to that promise.”

“My grandfather will never excuse your actions, you know that.”

Leo nodded.

She brushed a long spiral of her hair away from her face and tucked it behind her ear. “I can’t allow you to pay the price for something that was a result of my grandfather’s own vengeful machinations.”

“Your grandfather did not kidnap you, Miss Covington.”

“Had he not orchestrated such heinous acts against my father, you wouldn’t have had to kidnap me. So this rests solely on his head, not yours, Captain.”

Her assertion made him smile because she was so adamant in his defense, and because she was right. He wouldn’t have had to kidnap her. But he had.

“I would like you to take Willy and me to Crane Landing,” she said.

Her declaration surprised him. He would like nothing better than to take her there, to his home, but he couldn’t. “I can’t do that,

Grace. You need to go back to Fairview and talk with your grandfather. Family is important, and once the ties are broken, well, it might be impossible to get them back."

Her chin lifted, and she folded her arms across her chest. "I have nothing good to say to him right now. And there is nothing he can say to excuse his reprehensible deeds. Nor will he accept your actions or apology with any grace or forgiveness. He will crush you for daring to touch his family. You saw firsthand what he did to my father."

"I did," Leo said, feeling his gut twist with rage over Joseph Fairview's small-minded, selfish act that broke two hearts and stole years of love from Grace and her father. "But I believe, however wrongheaded his dealings have been, your grandfather loves you."

"Well, I don't want that possessive and controlling kind of love." Her gaze shifted out across the sparkling water and far horizon. "I never knew what freedom felt like until you plucked me from my cage." She turned her beautiful eyes back to him. "I once called you my captor, but you actually freed me. Thank you for that."

Stunned by her declaration, words escaped him.

"Please, Captain," she said, stepping forward and placing her warm palm over his bare wrist. "Take us to Crane Landing with you."

"Grace—Miss Covington, I can't in good conscience—"

"Willy needs to go home," she cut in. "He needs to be with his friends. I can't take him to Fairview right now. I'm too angry with my grandfather—and I don't know if my grandfather would accept my father's child into his home."

That was something Leo hadn't considered. The thought of anyone being unkind to Willy spiked Leo's protective instinct. He wouldn't allow anyone to abuse the boy.

"When we reach Crane Landing," she said, "I'll send a letter to my grandfather telling him I'd discovered my father was alive and that I'd hired you to take me to him."

"You don't have to protect me. I knew the risk when I brought

you onto my ship without your consent."

"You shouldn't be punished for helping me learn the truth about my father. Grandfather is the one who should be punished. His crime was far worse than yours. Please, Captain, my grandfather doesn't have to know the true circumstances behind how we came to be together. I've forgiven you, and well… I'm actually thanking you for making my most heartfelt dream of seeing my father again come true." With that, she gave his wrist a gentle nudge that caused the wheel to turn. "Willy belongs at Crane Landing. Let's take him home," she said.

Her soft plea melted him. His conscience demanded that he face up to his trespass, make Joseph Fairview realize how deeply his selfish, vengeful act had hurt Grace, and deal with the consequences. But his heart guided his hands and he turned *Destiny* northward, toward Crane Landing, toward the brother awaiting him there, toward the small house he would give up for Grace and Willy, the same home once shared by Willy and his father. There Thomas's children could begin a new life together.

A life Leo hoped to one day share with them.

Chapter Twenty-Three



Grace sat down in one of the two straight-backed rockers that flanked the large fireplace in the cottage, her body bone tired but her mind alive with hope and possibilities. The fire Leo had built before leaving for the *Destiny*, where he was now staying, filled the area with a soft light and a warmth that infused her body.

There wasn't one thing she didn't love about the oceanside cottage—from the pumpkin orange floors in the keeping room and the cluster of candles, presumably dipped long ago, hanging on a hook in the corner near the front window, to the many various-sized renderings of ships and sea life displayed throughout the house. With its worn but beautiful furniture, it was a warm, comfortable cottage that already felt like home.

Around her, she could see touches of her father and Willy—and also Leo, who'd occupied the house after Thomas had taken Willy to the island. The seafaring manual on the small table beside her could have belonged to either man, but the braided rug at her feet was the very one her mother had made for her father a lifetime ago before one of his many seafaring adventures… and the guitar housed at a slant in a stand in the corner to her right was no doubt one of Leo's.

The profound absence of her father in a place he'd called home cut a valley through her chest and brought tears to her eyes. She was getting a firsthand look inside the life her father had lived with Willy here in Crane Landing.

A life he'd lived without her. One she could have been part of if only her grandfather hadn't prevented it from happening.

But there was no sense shedding any more tears over something that couldn't be undone. For Willy's sake, and her own, she must move forward. How exactly to do that was still a mystery to her.

Her train of thought was interrupted by Willy barreling into the room like rolling thunder.

"The loft is just as I left it," he exclaimed, eyes wide with excitement. "Well, a little cleaner, maybe, but all the same. Can you come upstairs again? You can see the lighthouse right from my room! Sun's nearly set so the light shows better. Gotta hurry, though. The fog might be rolling in soon."

He didn't even wait for her answer, just pivoted back around, and raced for the stairs and the loft once again.

Grace got to her feet and followed in his exuberant wake. Her brother brought a lightness and innocent curiosity to her world that she'd been missing since being separated from Saul. Thankfully, the captain had checked in on Saul again that morning with his friend at the Old Anchor Inn. With the exception of her unexplained disappearance from Fairview, all was reported to be well with Saul and her grandfather. But presumably her fiancé was traveling, his purpose being, she could only surmise, to find her. Although the news about Saul and her grandfather brought her a measure of peace, her heart still ached over the loss of the family she'd loved—and the betrayal she'd suffered from the one she'd trusted the most.

Once up in the loft, she moved to the window and stood beside Willy. Her little brother's presence filled the room… and her aching heart.

"Isn't she magnificent?" he asked on a whisper, voice filled with expectancy and pride.

"Oh, Willy, it's quite a sight. How big must that light be?"

"Huge," he answered. "Runs on kerosene. Mr. Jenkins takes care of it all. He lives nearby, though you can't see his house from here. I'll bet he's there tonight, what with the fog rolling in and all."

“What does he do there?”

“Watches for ships. Makes sure the light stays lit. Once, he saw a small dory go topsy-turvy with a lone fisherman aboard. By the time the waves pushed the boat inland and Mr. Jenkins could reach it using a ladder as a bridging plank, the boat was empty. But a fishing line had wrapped about one oar hinge, so Mr. Jenkins, he started pulling on it thinking maybe at the other end would be the fisherman.”

“And was it?” she asked when Willy paused for effect.

He shook his head. “Not a man. But a big halibut, nearly a hundred pounds. Mr. Jenkins figured that’s what pulled the fisherman from the boat. They found the man later shored up on a rock. He was a mess, busted up from the rocks and near frozen to the bone, but he survived.”

“Oh my.” She looked back at the lighthouse, watching as the light flashed on and off. “I would like to visit the lighthouse someday.”

“We’ll go there and to the shipyard and all around the harbor. I’ll show you the cove where Papa used to take me fishing, and I’ll take you right out there,” he said, jabbing a finger near the window and pointing below them, “to the docks where we’d catch crayfish with Robbie.”

“Is Robbie your age?”

“Nah. He’s about two, maybe three.”

Grace felt her brow knit together in astonishment. “And he’d go in the water with you, for the crayfish?”

“All the way under sometimes, even digging under the rocks.”

“Why that’s just… unbelievable.” She pressed one hand to her chest just as Willy started to giggle.

He glanced up at her. “Robbie’s a dog,” he said, grinning mightily. “An English springer spaniel. ‘He’s a beaut’. That’s what Mr. Fogg and Papa would say about him. All I know is his coat is really soft and fluffy when he’s cleaned up, which isn’t often.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever met a springer spaniel.”

“Oh, you won’t be able to miss him. Comes right at you, he does, dirty paws and all. His owner, Mr. Grants, wrote about the life of all the dogs he’s had since he was just a boy—and he called it ‘The Adventures.’ It’s downstairs. Papa used to read to me from it every night.”

His words brought a bittersweet smile to her aching heart.

“And he would take me and Robbie fishing along the rocks, too, and sometimes to check the lobster cages closest to shore, and…” His words abruptly stopped. “But then Papa got real sick.” Willy’s chin dropped to his chest, his tone suddenly drained of energy. “He couldn’t do much then.”

Grace wrapped her arm about Willy’s small shoulders and gave him a gentle hug. “I can imagine how difficult that must have been for you.”

He didn’t say anything, just dragged his shirtsleeve across his nose.

“You know, Willy, when I first walked in this house, I could feel happiness here. I still can. It’s what you and our father created, and it dwells here still… and always will.”

“You think so?” he whispered.

“I do. I think Papa will always be here with us.”

“I hope so.” He leaned into her just a little, taking a deep breath.

“Tell you what, after you get cleaned up and ready for bed, I’ll come back and read a little from the adventure book before it’s time to say goodnight and turn out the light. Then tomorrow, you can introduce me to Robbie and start showing me all the places you just mentioned. Does that sound good?”

He nodded, brightening a bit. “You know where it’s at? The book?”

“I do. I noticed it earlier on the bookshelf in the parlor. Right beside our kaleidoscope.”

“Yep, it’s our special place now.” He grinned up at her. “We’ll start at the beginning,” he announced, “not where the bookmark is placed. You need to know how it all begins.”

“Of course,” she said with a laugh. “I wouldn’t want to miss any of it.”

She watched as he scurried away to wash up and brush his teeth, then she headed downstairs to get the book, feeling as though she and Willy were creating their own beginning.

GRACE TOOK immense pleasure in having Willy and Captain Sullivan introduce her to the beautiful oceanside town of Crane Landing.

They strolled wooden boardwalks and visited shops that hugged both sides of the bricked streets and offered everything from Maine blueberries in any dish imaginable to heirloom hope chests to warm sweaters handmade of Maine wool to so much more. Main Street led them straight down to the glistening bay that was dotted with large fishing boats and small dories. From there they meandered past the sawmill and shipyard, which Leo promised to show her in more detail when they had time, then on to the wharves where he and Willy pointed out several shops she was eager to visit on her own when she could wander at a leisurely pace.

Crane Landing was even lovelier than she’d imagined. And it was truly home for Willy. It was where he’d come as an infant in the arms of their father. It’s where he’d spent all but the last few months of his life. Willy’s happiest memories were here. It was where he had reunited with his friends. And it was where he would grieve and heal and learn to go on without their father.

Grace knew in her bones that she’d made the right decision to come here, and that knowledge brought her aching heart a measure of comfort.

She had thought it best to keep Willy out of school for the first week to give him time to adjust to being back in Crane Landing. The school year held two terms, she’d learned, one from early September through mid-November, and the other from early April

through early July. Judging by Willy's moments of melancholy and tears, the full weight of their father's death was sinking in, but he wanted to return to school where his friends were spending their days. Without them Willy had wandered the beach alone, a boy lost in his heartache that neither Grace nor the captain could assuage. And so she had sent him off to school that morning with a sack lunch and a warm hug and a silent hope that he would find comfort among his friends.

While Willy was away, she took the time to pen a letter to Devon. It was difficult to write because what had once seemed like an ideal marriage to a man she liked and admired was no longer enough. To break their engagement would likely break their friendship and a longtime union between two powerful families.

But she couldn't return to Philadelphia, and her feelings about Devon were deeply shadowed by her growing and undeniable feelings for the captain, so she did what she knew she must do.

Taking pen in hand, she began a long overdue letter to her intended.

Dear Devon,
I am writing to apologize for my sudden disappearance and to assure you I am in good health. My decision to leave was a spontaneous one, hence my lack of notice to you. I found myself overwhelmed by the many decisions and tasks required in planning a wedding that would meet your mother's expectations and my grandfather's level of grandeur. As you are aware, they both have extremely specific ideas of what our wedding day should be, and the pressure from the two of them simply became too much for me to bear.
Now that I've been away and have had time to think through our decision to marry, I must, for our mutual benefit, break our engagement.
My dearest Devon, you are my closest friend, and I will always have space for you in my life and in my heart, but we both

deserve a marriage that consists of more than friendship and an alliance between our families.
I hope you'll understand my decision and why I cannot return to Philadelphia.
Please assure Saul that I am well and that I miss him—and that the kaleidoscope is safe with me. Knowing these things will bring him great relief and comfort. He also knows where to find the beautiful betrothal ring you gave to me. Please let Saul know I'd like him to return it to you, and know my dearest Devon that I am returning it with love and affection.
I wish you good health, sunny days, and only star-filled nights, my beloved friend.
Always,
Grace

Releasing a strained sigh, Grace sealed and addressed the letter, leaving the return address blank, then left the cottage to post it. She wished she could have told Devon the truth about finding her father, but she couldn't risk that information getting back to her grandfather. He would use it to track her down.

With every step toward the post office, she felt guilty for breaking her engagement in a letter. Devon deserved better. But she was too angry with her grandfather to return to Philadelphia, and to do so would put the captain and his crew at risk. Also, Willy needed to be in Crane Landing where he could be with his friends and take comfort in familiar surroundings.

Still, she felt guilty because Devon and his unwavering friendship had been her lifeboat when she'd been drowning in grief. She owed him more than a letter.

But she owed Captain Sullivan too. He'd given her a few precious days with her father that had also brought Willy into her life. In whisking her away from her grandfather, the captain had freed her and had given her the oars with which to row her own boat and set her own course in life.

Captain Sullivan had also made his interest apparent during their time together on Indigo Isle, and more so since they'd returned to Crane Landing—because he hadn't known she was engaged; she'd worn no ring to signify Devon's commitment to her. *Was* engaged, she repeated silently as she handed her letter to the postmaster. For her, the engagement was over. From this moment forward, she was free to pursue her new life, and perhaps a new love, in her new home.

As she left the post office, a heavy weight seemed to lift off her shoulders. Ending her relationship with her grandfather and now with Devon hurt to her bones but also brought an uplifting sense of liberty.

She was finally able to move forward and stop looking back. With the question of her father's disappearance and suspected death finally cleared up, she felt a sense of closure and peace. And knowing the truth about her grandfather's betrayal cut the ties that had bound her to him. From this moment forward, she would begin in earnest to build a new life in this beautiful oceanside town. With Willy. And maybe even with Captain Sullivan.

Chapter Twenty-Four



Leo strode across Main Street, searching the boardwalk for his brother. Ashe had sent word that he'd arrived in Crane Landing.

They were to meet at the Crowe's Nest tavern where Leo had spent many hours enjoying mugs of ale and lively conversations with his friends during his years living in this place he now called home.

With his heart in his throat, he swung open the thick oak door that creaked on its hinges, the familiar sound sweet in his ears as he stepped inside. As he'd expected, Ashe wasn't there yet. The tavern was fairly quiet this evening, so he took a seat at the bar and nodded hello to Hiram, the barkeep.

"Good to have you back in town, young man!" Hiram said, placing a heavy mug of ale in front of Leo. "You meeting Adam tonight?"

"No, I'm meeting my brother."

Hiram's bushy gray eyebrows raised an inch. "Is that the one you've been waiting on?" At Leo's nod, the barkeep reached out and gave him a hard whack on the shoulder. "Good for you, Mr. Sullivan! This one's on the house. One for your brother, too, when he gets here."

The man's exuberance made Leo grin, and it released the tension between his shoulders. "Thank you, Hiram," he said, raising his mug to the barkeep who always had an ear to listen when one of his patrons needed one.

While Hiram returned to his work behind the bar, Leo let his gaze wander the tavern that had become a second home to him. He'd spent a good amount of time with friends and coworkers in this two-story building of worn pine floors and high tin-plated ceilings. They played cards and billiards at the farthest end of the large room, each game approached with the same gusto the men gave to their work in the sawmill and to building ships.

Now he was meeting his brother here, and making another memory—hopefully a good one—with his sibling.

Eagerly anticipating the moment Ashe would enter the tavern and walk back into his life, Leo swung his attention to the door. He couldn't wait to hear about Ashe's life, but he was also apprehensive about the potential horrors his brother might reveal. Ashe had indicated during their brief visit at the train station a year ago that he was the head of a large trading company, which suggested he had no financial worries, so perhaps there would be no secret horrors hiding in the dark corners of Ashe's life that would crawl out to torment Leo.

The low rumble of male voices coming from another table near the back of the room drew his attention to two men who were talking, elbows braced on the scarred wooden tabletops, their callused hands cupped around their mugs. Another man Leo didn't know sat four stools down the bar talking with Hiram.

The strangeness of the last four weeks left him feeling slightly off kilter. To think he was sitting in the tavern a free man, courting the woman he'd kidnapped, was reunited with his baby sister, and was now waiting for his brother to meet him for a mug of ale, felt like a dream.

But it was really happening. The tavern door swung open and Ashe appeared. Leo's little brother who had been nine years old when their family was shattered was now a tall, handsome man of means. His confidence was obvious in the cut of his suit and the authority in his stride as he crossed the room to where Leo sat, hands shaking, heart quaking, trying to hold himself together.

Ashe approached with his hand out, but Leo stood and embraced his brother with the back-slapping hug he'd been waiting over a year to give him.

With a laugh, Ashe slung one long leg over the barstool and sat. "Looks as if you've got a head start on me, big brother."

Hearing those words nearly unspooled Leo. He could only manage a crooked grin and a gesture for Hiram to bring his brother an ale.

"Devil of a storm off the coast delayed us a couple of days," Ashe said, starting their conversation with sailing in which they shared an interest. "How did *Destiny* fare on your journey?"

To see that Ashe was still a skilled conversationalist reminded Leo of the differences in his brothers' personalities. From childhood Ashe had had a knack for finding common ground from which to persuade or negotiate any situation. Many times it had been Ashe's smooth tongue that had steered their father away from rage and destruction. Ashe had been so different from Gray who would wade into the creek a few inches at a time, bravely but cautiously noticing everything around him as he proceeded, or from Cal who would blindly take a running leap off the creek bank and submerge himself in one fell swoop. Their youngest brother Benny seemed to be a blend of all of them, smart and persuasive like Ashe, inquisitive and considering like Gray, and when required bold and brave like Cal.

Leo couldn't wait to reunite with Gray and Cal to see if they had changed or if they still possessed the traits that would allow him a glimpse of his long-lost little brothers.

Finally finding his voice, he said, "*Destiny* caught a hard wind that damaged one of her sails, but we got her squared away and back under sail within hours."

And so it went for nearly an hour while Leo and his brother talked about their shared interest in sailing and ships and slowly got to know each other again. The illness of Ashe's adoptive father, which had interrupted Leo's meeting with him a year earlier, had

thrust Ashe into the position of running a large trading company. Ashe had just spent the past many months visiting his trading partners in India and Europe. He claimed he was glad to be back and that he planned to spend some time tending to his business in the states.

The news thrilled Leo. To have the opportunity to reconnect with Ashe, and hopefully also with Gray and River, was deeply nourishing to a man who'd been starving for his family.

Although Ashe seemed at ease talking about business, and Leo was deeply interested, he wanted to know more about his brother's personal life. He needed to know more.

"So… is there a Mrs. Ashe Middleton?" he asked out of the blue.

The question brought a startled laugh from Ashe who rocked back on his barstool. "Happy to say that I've escaped that noose. How about you, brother?"

"Not yet," Leo said, but it was the first time the talk of marriage was something he might one day be able to consider. The thought of seeing Grace tomorrow sent a bolt of warmth and excitement through his chest. "So no special lady for you then?" he asked.

"Not one." Ashe braced his elbow on the bar. "Seems I only meet gals who are angling to elevate their social position. I'm not interested in any of that nonsense."

"I would think those ladies would be part of your circle of friends and not be in need of elevating," Leo said, knowing his brother was raised in a home of significant wealth that had surely earned him a place at the top of elite society.

"Acquaintances are a far cry from friends."

"That they are," Leo said, agreeing with his brother. "But I hope you have good friends, Ashe."

"Of course." He grinned. "But they're all men. The gals I've met tend to want more than friendship, which suits me fine for romantic pursuits, but those lead right back to the marriage noose, so I mostly avoid those entanglements." Ashe braced an elbow on the bar and cocked an eyebrow. "How about you? Any friends and

lovers?"

Leo laughed at his brother's playful taunt. "My good friend Adam Grayson lives here in Crane Landing. I hope to introduce the two of you soon. As for a lover, well, the situation is complicated." Ignoring Ashe's piqued interest, Leo tossed out another of the many questions he wanted to ask his brother. "Were you happy in your home, Ashe? Were your parents good to you?"

"Is this your way of changing the subject?" Ashe asked, a grin tilting his mouth.

"No," Leo said honestly, his gut churning with concern. "I really need to know if you were treated well."

"I was," Ashe said, his smile disappearing as if he sensed the seriousness of what Leo was asking. "I had kind parents and a privileged life. I got lucky, Leo."

"Did you ever think I'd deserted you?"

"What?" Ashe sat upright, a perplexed look on his face. "Of course not. Why would you think such a thing?"

"Because I convinced Dad that he should take you to Aunt Betty's house. I told him we could get more work done with you four younger ones out of the way." Leo shook his head, sick with regret. "I was just trying to protect you all from his drunken rages."

"You did protect us, Leo. Every time Dad raised his hand or lifted his belt strap, you stepped in and took the beating." Remorse lined Ashe's face. "You shouldn't have had to do that. The man was an abusive monster to all of us, but you got the worst of it. Always." They both seemed to slip into the past for a moment, then Ashe nudged Leo's hand with his mug. "You did us a favor by getting us out of there, Leo. I just wish you had come with us."

He did, too, but had he gone with his younger siblings, Benny would have been born without protection, without a big brother to keep him alive, to keep him safe and to find them both a new and better life.

After a moment of silence, Leo asked, "Did you know that our mother died shortly after Benny was born?"

Ashe shook his head. “Not until a few years ago when I tried to find her. I thought she might know where the rest of you ended up. I found out from her neighbors. They told me she died shortly after childbirth. I thought the baby had died too.”

“He would have,” Leo said, knowing it was true. “Do you remember Mrs. Capri who lived at the end of our road in that little white house with all the cats?”

Ashe released a snort of laughter. “I do. She had about as many kids as she had cats.”

Leo grinned. “That she did. But she nursed Benny for several months and helped me take care of him. I did some work around her place when I could, but Dad kept me busy on the farm so it wasn’t often I could help her out.”

“I’m sure he did. He was probably off drinking while you were home working.”

“Exactly. After Mom died, he got a lot worse. And he was furious that he had another mouth to feed. He was going to take Benny to an orphanage.”

“That wretch.” Ashe’s hand clenched around his mug. “He’d better hope I never see him again.”

“Same here.”

“How did you and Benny end up in Fredonia?” Ashe asked.

“Dad dumped us at an orphanage in Dunkirk, which is only a few miles away.”

“You were probably better off there.”

“We were to a degree. But a young couple wanted to take Benny —but not me.” Leo sighed. “I couldn’t be certain they would treat him well, and Benny was still a baby. He deserved to be safe and cared for. Plus, I’d already lost all of you. I couldn’t lose any more of my family. So I left the orphanage and took Benny with me.”

“I’d have done the same thing.”

“In the middle of winter? With no place to go?”

Ashe winced. “That would complicate things.”

Leo laughed. “It sure did. We were freezing and hungry. I broke

into a greenhouse thinking it would be a warm, safe place to hide out. I didn't realize the sheriff owned the greenhouse."

"Oh ho!" Ashe said, exploding with laughter. "That must have been a pickle."

"Turns out it was the luckiest night of my life. Benny and I found a good home and I found a best friend." Leo drained his mug and gestured to Hiram to bring two more. When he turned back to his brother, Ashe looked sick to his stomach.

"I'm sorry I didn't do more to try to help you."

Leo frowned. "What could you have done? You were nine years old."

"I could have pushed my parents harder to find all of you. I did ask. And they did try. But when they said they couldn't find any of you, I believed them. I stopped asking because I was afraid they would send me back to live with our wretched father. I didn't know if you were still living with our father, but I knew you could take care of yourself. I figured Gray, River, and Cal were all better off wherever they were. I'm ashamed now that I didn't do more to help you all, especially after hearing your story."

"You were smart to protect yourself and stay with the people who were so kind to you. They sound pretty exceptional."

"They are. I didn't realize just how committed to me they were until they found our no-good father."

Leo's eyes widened at the unexpected news. "I was sure he'd drunk himself to death years ago."

"He might have," Ashe said. "My parents found him shortly after they took me in. They wanted to adopt me but needed our father to sign the papers. Turns out my adoptive parents had to pay him off to sign the papers."

Leo's mouth twisted in disgust. "I'd like to say I'm surprised but I'm not."

"I was glad to be rid of him, and very glad my parents were kind enough and wealthy enough to make him go away."

"What was it like being raised in a wealthy home?"

Ashe tipped his barstool up on two legs and planted both elbows on the bar behind him, his expensive single-breasted cutaway coat hanging open to reveal a hand-stitched vest, narrow tie, and crisp white shirt. With one hand holding his mug of ale, he said, “The food was incredible.”

They both burst out laughing but there was an underlying sadness because they had both known extreme hunger in their lives.

“I think I was in shock,” Ashe said. “The house was so huge I constantly got lost the first month I was there. I had my own wing in the house, my own horse, my own everything. I attended lawn parties and so many social events I felt a little dizzy the first few years. My father introduced me to golf and horse racing and sailing and taught me the trade business.”

“I can’t even imagine that sort of life,” Leo said sincerely.

Ashe nodded that he understood, because he did, but something dark moved through his eyes. “It’s a life of plenty, Leo, but that comes at cost of personal freedom. I have many obligations and expectations to meet. My time is often not my own. And true friendships are difficult to come by.”

“I imagine it can be stifling.” Leo felt very blessed to have fallen into the loving arms of the Grayson family and his honorary parents Cyrus and Tansy Darling. The only thing they expected from him was integrity and kindness.

“So how was Charleston?” Ashe asked. “Any luck tracking down that name I gave you?”

Warmth blossomed in Leo’s chest. “I found our sister.”

“What?” Ashe’s barstool legs hit the wood floor with a thud. “We’ve been sitting here over an hour and you’re just now telling me this?”

Laughing, Leo said, “You should see her, Ashe. She’s beautiful like our mother was. And she’s smart and funny and outspoken. She’s curious and persistent to the point of being intrusive, and she honestly believes she’ll work for the Pinkerton Agency someday. She’s a precocious young woman with remarkably big dreams.”

“She sounds amazing,” Ashe said, pleasure shining in his eyes. “And I applaud her resolve.”

“You’ll love her, Ashe.” Leo told him how he’d found her at the bakery, and that he’d met her mother, and that he’d learned that their brother Gray worked for the Pinkerton Agency.

Ashe seemed to be as relieved as Leo had felt upon learning that Gray and River had been raised by a loving couple.

“During my last, and very rushed, trip to Charleston, I met River’s adoptive father. He’s a gentle giant of a man and a doting father to River. Gordon and Pollyanna Drayton are wonderful people.”

“It seems our baby sister has benefited from her life with the Draytons and that she is well loved,” Ashe said.

Knowing that to be true eased Leo’s conscience considerably. “It sure was hard to leave her after so many years of searching for her.”

“I can well imagine,” Ashe said. “I’m beyond eager to go see her, and I’ll be doing that just as soon as I finish some pressing business here I must tend to.”

“I plan to go back soon too. Hopefully, this time Gray will be there.”

“What’s the story with him?” Ashe asked.

Leo told him what he knew, and that Gray was unreachable at present. And then he told Ashe about River’s plea to find Cal. “Do you have any idea where he might be living now?” he asked.

“London perhaps.”

Leo’s jaw dropped. “Cal is in London?”

“I don’t know for sure.” A look of unease crossed his face. “I was going to tell you this last year when we met at the train station, but I needed to figure out what was going on with Cal. I found out that he’d been working at a steel mill in Buffalo.”

“Buffalo?” Leo’s chest seemed to collapse. “He was only hours away from Fredonia and I couldn’t find him?”

“I don’t think he wanted to be found. I called the mill, but Cal was cold when they got him on the phone and said he didn’t want

to see me."

That surprised Leo… and confused him… and broke his heart.

Ashe shrugged. "I don't know why Cal was so abrupt, but he seemed angry."

"That boy was always angry."

A slight grin tipped Ashe's mouth and he gave a nod of agreement. "I went to Buffalo anyway, Leo. But when I got there Cal was gone. From what I was able to learn during my visit, Cal had boarded a ship a day after my call and set off for London."

For a long moment Leo contemplated this information, his brain and his heart spinning and crashing. "If Cal is angry with us, it's entirely my fault."

"Poppycock, Leo. You had no more control over what happened to us than any of us did. You were the oldest and were used to looking out for us but that didn't mean you could do anything about our circumstances."

"Maybe not. But I sure feel like I should have done a better job of keeping you all safe—and keeping us together as a family. I'm sorry I couldn't do that."

"I couldn't manage it either, Leo. Gray probably feels the same way."

"According to River, he does."

Ashe's eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"Apparently when Gordon and Pollyanna wanted to take in River, Gray refused to let her go, so they took Gray along as well. Gray begged them to take Cal with him and River, but they were a middle-aged couple who wanted a baby, not a whole family."

"So Cal was left behind?"

"He was," Leo said with a deflated sigh. "I can't imagine how frightened he must have been. He'd been deserted by every one of us. Most of all by me."

"Didn't anyone take him in?"

"Many times, from what I understand, but none of his homes sounded nurturing or kind for a boy of his age or disposition. River

and Gray's parents tried to find Cal—they promised Gray they would find him and bring him into their family—but Cal was impossible to locate because he was bounced between homes and farms and an orphanage. Finally, he ran away. The Draytons were never able to find him, which is apparently why Gray blames his adoptive parents for leaving Cal behind."

"What a shame." A look crossed Ashe's face that suggested he felt sick inside too. "I have contacts in London. I'll pull out all stops to see if they can find anything on Cal. I'd meant to do so before now but I've been wildly busy trying to manage our business without my father's assistance. We've been partners for the last three years. Didn't realize how much he handled until the full responsibility fell on my shoulders."

"I can imagine. But Ashe, we need to find Cal. And it sounds as if Gray does too."

"We'll find him, Leo. I promise. We'll find our little brother."

Chapter Twenty-Five



Grace sat on Adam and Rebecca Grayson's back porch embroiled in conversation with Leo's brother Ashe. Rebecca's good friend Mary Crane was also taking part in their discussion, the three of them expressing their distaste for some of the social commitments they'd been obligated to attend.

Ashe waved a hand in disgust. "Social balls are boring in the extreme and the girls are tiresome."

"As is the unwelcome groping of the so-called gentlemen who attend!" Grace parried, and immediately clapped a hand over her mouth.

A burst of laughter rolled through the small gathering. Unable to believe what had just come out of her mouth, and right in front of people she'd met for the first time only an hour ago, Grace cringed.

Why on earth had she felt compelled to respond to Ashe's comment? Because she'd been offended on behalf of all the ladies forced into constricting corsets and ballgowns and put on display for arrogant men who thought their money entitled them to anything they desired. Was Ashe Middleton one of those arrogant men?

Leo's brother was still hooting with laughter, as were the others.

Face burning, Grace lowered her hand and pressed it to her thudding heart. "Gracious, I apologize for my obscene lack of etiquette. I don't know what I was thinking."

"We do!" Rebecca said, laughing herself to tears. "Thanks to

your marvelous insight, I shall watch my person closely should we ever merit an invitation to such an esteemed event."

An uproar of laughter sailed across the back lawn and tumbled down the bank of the Crane River only a schooner's length away.

Mary Crane clapped her hands. "I applaud your courageous and accurate assessment, dear Grace."

Grace cut her eyes to Leo, expecting to see the censuring expression she would have seen on her grandfather's face. These people were Leo's friends. He'd met Adam and Rebecca when they were in their teens and all lived in Fredonia, New York. He'd met Mary only a few years ago, but they were good friends as well. Grace had hoped to join their close-knit group, but now she wasn't sure if she'd accomplished that or ruined her chances. One glance at the captain gave her the answer. He was chuckling, his gaze filled with pleasant surprise and something close to adoration.

"Well then," Ashe said, drawing her attention back to him, "now that we're clear on our feelings for social events, Miss Covington, how do you feel about sporting events?"

His joking made her smile. "I quite like horse racing. And I might as well confess now that I always seem to bet on the last horse to cross the finish line. There should be a prize for that, don't you think, Mr. Middleton?"

And on it went with all around joking and laughter between the adults while Willy played with Rebecca's younger brother Tyler who was visiting. Rebecca had explained to Grace that Tyler, and her other siblings, would attend school in Crane Landing when they visited if it happened to be during their normal school session. Both boys, now schoolmates for a few weeks, were in the yard with Adam and Rebecca's one-year-old son, Finn.

Grace couldn't remember a time when she'd felt more at ease in a gathering. But the look in Leo's eyes made her wonder if she'd somehow erred. It wasn't jealousy in his eyes. Nor was it censure. It was… growing concern. But why? Had she done something wrong, other than making her outrageous comment of course? Was he

worried about his brother? Ashe seemed to be well received by Adam and Rebecca, and Grace could tell that she and Rebecca and Mary were going to become fast friends. So whatever worry had crept into the captain's eyes was a question that wouldn't be answered until later, if ever.

Grace and Mary helped Rebecca serve a light supper on the porch. After cleaning up dishes, they settled in again with the men to enjoy the rest of the evening. Adam was telling Ashe about the Grayson sawmill in Fredonia, and how Leo had nearly buried himself in a pile of birch logs his first day.

"Plopped his hind-side right on the logs without a thought to them shifting," Adam said, shaking his head and laughing. "I saved his bacon every day, I think."

"Oh ho!" Leo said, coming alive at Adam's obvious jesting. "I believe I saved you a time or two in the shipyard."

"That you did," Adam readily agreed. "We sure had some good times back then. Remember that first hunt we went on with my dad and Uncle Boyd, and that snowball fight that ensued?"

Leo's laugh mesmerized Grace. He looked so different like this, relaxed among friends, taking obvious pleasure in having his brother back and his friends close.

"They nearly buried us in the snow as I recall," he said.

"Yeah… it was one of the best days." Adam shifted his gaze from Leo to Ashe. "Surely you two got up to no good while you were all at home."

Ashe shot a conspiratorial grin at Leo. "Remember when we stole dad's belt buckle and put it on the train track?"

Leo released a snort of laughter. "Sure do. That train flattened it and wrapped it around the track like a clamp." He looked at Adam. "Thought that would be the end of beatings with Dad's belt buckle, but it earned us a good one with the strap."

"Sure did," Ashe said, "and he bought himself a new, heavier buckle, so the joke was on us."

The men chuckled, but it didn't seem like a joke to Grace. She

found it sad that their memories were filled with abuse and separation instead of snowball fights and jesting at the family sawmill. That glimpse into Leo's childhood made her want to know more, and yet she couldn't bear the thought of there being more of those stories.

But there were more stories from Ashe and Leo, and from Leo and Adam, and she realized that Leo cared deeply for both men. Some of the stories were funny or surprising or mildly shocking, but all of them gave her insight into the captain. He'd been a bit of a rascal at times but from all accounts had always been respectful and looked out for others. Although she knew Leo was extremely bright, Adam and Ashe reaffirmed it through their stories of how Leo cobbled together a sleeping pallet to keep his siblings off the cold earthen floor in the frigid winter, and fixed broken down farm equipment with spit and shoestrings. Adam added his stories of Leo's bravery and strength, poking fun at Leo for threatening to flatten Adam's nose when Adam found them in the greenhouse and refused to return Benny to Leo's protective arms—that were the size of logs according to Adam.

The remembrances made them laugh and sigh and nearly cry, but every story seemed to salve a wound in Leo's heart. And yet Grace saw the pain that shadowed his eyes and underscored his laugh. He seemed to have recovered his composure since losing his hair tie, but she sensed a deep heartache in him over that particular loss. Why on earth was that old leather string so dear to him?

As if the captain felt her eyes on him, he met her gaze, his own mildly surprised and a little too pleased. His wink caused a flush of heat to suffuse her cheeks. The man was growing bolder with his flirtation, and though she couldn't deny enjoying his attention, it was difficult to keep her focus, which was shamefully obvious as she attempted to follow the lively conversation between her new friends.

As the evening drew to a close, Rebecca scooped her tired son into her arms and invited Willy to stay the night with Tyler.

Eyes wide with excitement, Willy turned to her… then to Leo… then back to her, as if he didn't know who to ask for permission.

"As long as you're sure," Grace said to Rebecca, solving Willy's dilemma and assuring herself that her hosts really didn't mind having another child for the night.

"Of course not. The boys will be fine here." With that, Rebecca tucked Finn against her shoulder and bid them a good evening.

Grace, Mary, Ashe, and Leo headed out together. With a leisurely gate, they walked down River Road, talking and jesting, until they bid Mary a goodnight at the door to her parents' mansion. A bit farther on, River Road became Bay Street that led them to Main Street where they turned off. During their walk, Leo explained that Mary had been widowed years earlier and hadn't seemed interested in finding a new husband.

The news surprised Grace. "That is simply heartbreaking. But if it's been years, why hasn't such a lovely young woman been wooed off her feet by a handsome gentleman by now?"

"I don't think Mary wants to be wooed or to remarry."

Grace thought on that for a few minutes while Leo and Ashe chatted about ships. Had Mary's first husband been unkind? Had he broken her heart? Had he been the love of her life? If so, perhaps her grieving heart simply couldn't find room to love another man."

"Goodnight, Miss Covington," Ashe said, as he prepared to head farther out Main Street to the inn where he was staying. "It was a delightful evening and a true pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Likewise," she said, grinning in acknowledgement of their playful banter. Ashe Middleton was a dashing man with a marvelous sense of humor and the same disdain of pomp and ceremony that she abhorred.

After shaking hands and agreeing to meet the next day, Leo said goodbye to his brother. Tucking Grace's hand in the crook of his elbow, he guided them onto Juniper Lane, a narrow cobblestone street that skirted the rocky shore and led to his cottage that overlooked the ocean.

She knew they shouldn't be alone, especially at night, but no one was about to cast disapproving glances. And so Grace relaxed and enjoyed their stroll.

"I didn't realize the untoward behavior that went on at those elite balls you and Ashe were obligated to attend," the captain said, his struggle to suppress his laughter failing miserably.

"Laugh if you will, Captain, but I quite agree with your brother with regard to attending those functions. I was miserable from the dress fittings to the last dance of the evening."

"To suffer such treatment is abominable," he quipped. "Fancy dresses and decadent food and ballroom dances… what a pity."

She realized then that he couldn't fathom her world because his had been so diametrically different. Where she had felt the suffocating attention of her grandfather and the obligations and strict code of conduct, the captain had felt the fearful absence of attention, security, and love.

"I'm not of your world, Grace. I can't take you to balls because I don't even merit an invitation. But I enjoy spending time with you, so I'm asking if you're interested or if you prefer a man more suitable to your station in life. A man of my brother's position, perhaps."

Her mouth dropped open and she stopped walking. "I'm offended that you would think I care a whit about any of that nonsense, Captain."

"You, Ashe, and Mary seemed to be taking great pleasure in conversing about those things this evening."

"We were taking pleasure in it," she said, bewildered that the conversation bothered him. "Because we were agreeing and joking about the absurdity of the events and obligations thrust upon us. If you felt I was longing to go back to that life, you couldn't be more wrong. I am eternally grateful to you for helping me escape all of that. The only thing I left behind that I'll miss forever is Saul." The truth was, she would also miss her grandfather, the kind man he used to be, and also her friendship with Devon. But she did not miss

that life.

The captain seemed to be mulling that over as they began walking. After a minute of silence, he drew her to a stop again and placed his warm palm over hand still tucked in the crook of his elbow.

"Miss Covington," he began, his voice all proper and gentlemanly, "may I court you?"

She released a breathy laugh. "I would be honored by your suit, Captain."

He returned her smile. "Then may I call you Grace?"

"You already have, several times."

"But you have not granted me that intimacy yet."

"I know."

He laughed.

She did too, and then said, "Of course. And I'll do my best to use your given name as well, but I must confess I rather like addressing you as Captain."

"You may call me anything you like," he said, and then he lowered his mouth to hers in a brief, barely-there kiss that swept over her like a silken caress.

The warmth of his palm against the back of her neck made her shiver.

"You're chilled… I should get you home," he said, slipping his arm around her shoulders and setting off toward the cottage again.

She hadn't wanted the kiss to end, but he was right. She was cold. The ocean breeze was still chilly in May, and she wished she had a heavier shawl to wear. The cloak she'd been wearing when Leo kidnapped her was too heavy for spring wear. And she hadn't wanted to purchase any unnecessary items with the limited funds in her bank account. Being able to make use of the captain's cottage was saving her a good sum, but she couldn't impose on his kindness for long. Which encouraged her to broach the subject of lodgings with him. "I've been meaning to talk with you about my use of your cottage," she said. "Although I'm deeply grateful for your

generosity, I simply can't impose longer than absolutely necessary. Therefore, I hope you'll help me find suitable lodging for myself and Willy." Swallowing her pride, she forced herself to admit her concern. "As you know, there wasn't a big sum of money in my father's account, so I'll need to find something reasonable until… well, I suppose until I can sell my father's island home. I'll need to discuss this with Willy, of course, but I suspect he has no desire to return or to live on the island any more than I do."

The captain's arm flexed as he stopped and gently turned her to face him. "The cottage belonged to your father. Consider it your home, Grace."

"He left it to you."

"Because he thought I might be the one raising Willy."

Because her father had been concerned that she might not accept her little brother. The thought injured her, but she was glad her father had seen to it that Willy would be left in good hands either way.

"Your father hadn't seen you in years, Grace. He didn't know how you would react to learning he was alive and that he had a son… that you had a brother. He had to know Willy would be taken care of."

"I understand," she said, and she did, but it hurt just the same to think her father hadn't understood that her heart was the same loving heart that had beat in his little girl's chest.

"He wanted Willy to stay in the cottage that has been his home all his life," the captain said, "where he feels most at home. I do too."

Staying at the cottage would relieve her of an enormous financial burden and provide the most comforting home for Willy. But she couldn't push the captain out of his own home.

They turned off the street and walked down the long drive toward the dark cottage, backlit by shimmering twilight and the ocean. The captain's voice broke into her warring thoughts. "I know what you're thinking, Grace, but you're not putting me out. I have everything I need on *Destiny*. I lived quite happily on my ship when

your father and Willy lived at the cottage. So consider the matter settled. The cottage is yours to do with as you like."

"That's too generous, Captain, but for Willy's sake I can't decline your offer."

"Good," he said with a smile. "It's settled."

"Then may I ask you to add a couple of flower boxes to the street side of the cottage?"

"Already booting me out and asking for more, are you?"

She cringed, and he released a belt of laughter.

"My dear, Grace, I will add flower boxes to every window in the cottage if that pleases you."

Chapter Twenty-Six



The remainder of May brought warmer days with red trillium and white and blue forget-me-nots that created a colorful display in the dappled shade of the woodlands and deer paths. Yellow colt's foot hugged the ditches and sandy creek banks, and blue speedwell blossoms the size of Grace's small fingernail blanketed lawns and fields and edges of the forests. June arrived with an explosion of flowers, clear blue skies, and a profusion of leaves that turned the forests verdant green.

With Willy in school, Grace spent many delightful hours with Leo exploring her beautiful new home. They took leisurely walks along the sandy ocean shore, talking and getting to know one another. Although Leo seemed hesitant to talk about his past, he shared much about his time living in Fredonia with his youngest brother, Benny, and their guardians, Cyrus and Tansy. Leo told Grace about how the Grayson family had welcomed them. They'd given Leo a job and taught him the sawmill business, which had given him the skills to work at Crane and Grayson Shipbuilding where he'd learned the new trade of building ships.

Grace could sense Leo's love and respect for the Graysons, and for Cyrus and Tansy, and she felt a deep sense of gratitude to all of them.

As the days warmed, Grace's handsome escort took her boating on the Crane River where they picnicked on its sandy, rock-strewn shore, laughing, and gently teasing as they learned each other's

sense of humor. On foot, and occasionally hand-in-hand, they explored sun-dappled deer paths that led deep into the forest where Grace would stand in awe, marveling at the ensemble of birdsong and beautiful wildlife. Wood sorrel, with its yellow shamrock shaped blossoms mingled with white blossomed bunchberries and wintergreen that decorated the woodlands. Purple columbine grew along the borders of grassy fields she and Leo crossed to visit apple orchards bedecked by white apple blossoms.

"It smells absolutely lovely here," she said, inhaling the sweet, slightly rosy scent that permeated the orchard.

"Most of these blossoms will fall off in a week or so," Leo said, reaching up to pick one of the small flowers.

"I wish they'd last year-round. The scent is heavenly."

He gave her the small flower. "I can pick a basketful for you, if you like."

She laughed. "I would rather have a basketful of apples."

"Me, too. But depending on the variety, they won't be ready for picking until August or some as late as October." He told her about the orchard the Grayson's owned and how he and Adam and Rebecca had spent a good deal of time working and playing there.

"You were fortunate to have so many friends," she said, feeling a little envious. Before the accident that had taken her mother, she'd had plenty of friends, but after that day only Saul and Devon had been consistently in her life. Other than social gatherings, her grandfather had shut out the rest of the world in an effort to protect her.

"I was—I am fortunate," he said, correcting himself. "I had a lot of fun while working the sawmill with Adam and the Grayson men. Even thinking about those days makes me laugh." Taking her hand in his and continuing their stroll through the orchard, he told her about the friendly heckling that went on all day between the crew, with Rebecca's uncle Boyd at the center of most of the mischief and shenanigans.

By the time he shared his third story about the Grayson

brothers, Grace was belly laughing in a most unladylike manner that she simply couldn't control. And so it went as they spread a blanket beneath an apple tree and settled themselves in the shade.

Later, after they shared some cold tea and blueberry scones, Leo told her about Rebecca's accident at the mill, her subsequent amnesia, and how it had devastated all of them.

"How utterly tragic." Grace felt queasy from shock and sympathy. "I can't even imagine what Rebecca and her family must have gone through."

"It was a dark time for all of us." Leo's eyes registered how deeply he loved his extended family. "It was an especially hard road for Adam and Rebecca, but the blessing is that they got to fall in love all over again."

His observation made Grace smile. "I hadn't realized what a romantic you are, Captain."

He shrugged a shoulder. "Observant might be a more appropriate word."

"All right. You are romantic and observant."

His laugher rolled across the orchard.

"Tell me more about Rebecca's father and uncles and your time in Fredonia."

Leaning back on his hands, Leo stretched his long legs out in front of him and crossed them at the ankles. With every story he shared, he revealed a bit more of himself, but he seemed to steer clear of his early life before he'd met the Graysons. Like small treasures, she tucked the stories safely away where she could later revisit and inspect them.

IT SURPRISED Grace how deeply she missed Leo. He and Ashe had taken *Destiny* down the coast to Charleston to visit their sister River and to hopefully find Gray there as well. Leo hadn't known how long they would be gone, but he'd suggested they'd be back within

a couple of weeks. It had been fifteen days and there was still no sight of *Destiny*'s sails on the horizon.

Grace had been filling her days with cleaning and laundry and making the cottage as homey and comforting as possible. Her evenings were dedicated to Willy, cooking his supper, not an easy task for a woman unskilled in that area, playing games with him, and walking the beach together as they learned about each other's past and shared memories of their father. At bedtime they read Willy's favorite books until his eyes were heavy with sleep.

It was after Willy fell asleep that Grace would find herself alone in the quiet night that stretched out ahead of her. During those lonely hours, her thoughts turned to Leo.

And to her father.

And to her grandfather.

She missed them all. Despite her grandfather's betrayal, she missed his strong presence in her life. He'd been her security and her family and even her playmate at times… giving her horseback rides on his strong shoulders during her childhood days, and playing chess and other games in her teen years that would often turn into lively debates and uproarious laughter. He'd been everything to her.

And the whole time he'd been keeping a horrible secret.

Shrugging off her heartache, she reminded herself to focus on the new life she was creating with Willy, the captain, and her friends. She would learn to live without her grandfather just as she'd learned to live without her mother and father. Her life was here now.

Rebecca and Mary had visited twice since Leo had left for Charleston. Grace was meeting them tomorrow at the Beacon Inn where they were taking her to lunch to celebrate her birthday. The thought of spending time with them, chatting and joking like old friends, lifted her spirits as she climbed into bed.

Despite her restless sleep, she woke in the morning eager to visit with her friends. She washed and dressed for her lunch with a light

heart. After dropping Willy at his friend Johnathan's house, Grace made her way to Main Street. It was a splendid day for a walk, and she enjoyed window shopping on her leisurely stroll.

The Beacon Inn welcomed her with wide steps, a deep porch with square columns, and thickly cushioned wrought iron chairs tucked around linen draped tables. Rebecca and Mary were already seated outside at the far end of the porch. They hailed Grace with bright smiles.

Baby Finn sat on Rebecca's lap, clapping his hands together and bouncing on her knee. The dark haired, brown-eyed little boy leaned forward and grabbed a fork and the linen tablecloth with it. With a gentle admonishment, Rebecca eased the item from his wet fist and chucked him under the chin. "You are becoming a handful, little man."

Laughing, Grace settled herself at the table. "Still think you're ready for another baby?"

"Absolutely," Rebecca said, the love for her child shining in her eyes. "I think I want a girl and then a couple more boys."

"If the adoring looks from your husband are any indication, you'll be having at least that many children," Mary said, making them all laugh.

Grace fell into conversation with them as if they'd known each other for years. She learned more about Rebecca's life in Fredonia, and that some of Rebecca's memories were still foggy or fragmented. But talking about the accident didn't seem to bother Rebecca. She said she remembered what was important: filling her mind and heart with beautiful memories every day.

In that moment, Grace realized she was doing the same. She was keeping the pieces of her life she treasured and moving forward with creating a life she loved. If only she could escape the shadows of her past that haunted her when she was alone and most vulnerable.

It seemed that Mary's life was just as complicated. Despite living in her parents' home, she was independent in mind and spirit. She

also seemed to carry pain and loss in her eyes that resonated with Grace. Mary told her that she'd been married only a year when her husband, Peter, captain of one of the Crane's merchant vessels, had died unexpectedly while picking up cargo in the Cayman Islands. Although a good bit older than Mary, she said she had loved him deeply.

"Such a heartbreaking loss," Grace said in sympathy. "I hope you can find love again someday."

Mary shrugged as if it was of no matter. "I'm quite content as an independent woman."

"It's true," Rebecca said, patting Finn's back as he cuddled against her shoulder. "Mary is as happy being independent as I am being married." She cocked her head to one side and eyed Grace. "What about you? Are you seeking marriage or to remain independent?"

"Marriage, definitely," Mary said, boldly interjecting her opinion. She arched a shapely eyebrow at Grace as if challenging her to disagree. "I've seen the way you look at Leo. That's not the look of a woman who wants to remain independent." A grin spread across her pretty face. "Unless your independence includes a dalliance with a handsome captain."

Grace gasped. Rebecca laughed. And Mary winked. So this was girl talk and playful jesting, something Grace hadn't been privy to in her sequestered world. Conversation in that world had centered on shopping and theater and gossip.

"I think I should like to be both married and retain some independence," she said, giving Mary a pointed look that set them off again.

And so it went for an hour while they ate lunch, and then tucked a sleeping Finn into his baby carriage. They walked down Main Street together, popping into shops to view the new fashions and extol the virtues or flaws of those items. Rebecca purchased a couple of gifts for her baby and her husband. Mary ordered several items to be delivered to the carriage house on her parents' property

that she was converting to a small house of her own.

Grace looked at kitchen implements she didn't have in the cottage and admired dresses that would fill out her scant wardrobe, but she made only one small purchase. She had to preserve her money for necessities. For the first time in her life, the price of an item mattered. It shamed her to think of her past and how she'd never once considered the cost of her dresses or jewelry or other items she'd purchased at will. Finances hadn't been an issue. Although Mary Crane hadn't been excessive in her selections or spending, it was obvious she had unlimited access to the kind of wealth Grace had once enjoyed. This is what Leo had seen the other night at the Grayson home, and why it concerned him. He'd known he couldn't support her at that level.

Having wealth did indeed make some things easier. That was true. But it also made some things more difficult and restrictive. For Grace, her independence was worth far more than access to her grandfather's money.

So maybe she was an independent woman after all—but one who wanted love in her life too.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



When Grace answered the knock at the door, she was deeply relieved to see Leo waiting on the other side. With his windswept hair and sun-kissed cheeks, he stood tall and confident—and breathtakingly handsome.

Without giving her an instant to say hello, he stepped inside, pulled her into his arms, and swung her in a circle that swept her from the foyer into the nearby sitting room. Once her feet touched the floor, she gazed up with a breathless laugh that was cut short by his thrilling kiss.

The floor shifted beneath her feet, and warmth swirled around her. The feeling of being in his arms was as immersive as slipping into a deep bath, the welcoming warmth, intoxicating scent, and liquid pleasure of him surrounding her whole body.

He steadied her in his strong embrace and lifted his head. “I’ve missed you.”

“What took you so long?” she whispered, completely overcome by her intense longing for him, for his presence that brought warmth and light to her life. “Did you finally meet with Gray?”

The joy drained from his expression, and he gave a small shake of his head. “No. He hasn’t returned, and no one has heard from him.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, moving deeper into his embrace and tightening her arms around him. “You’ll find him eventually.”

He nodded but didn’t seem convinced.

Wanting to erase the pain in his eyes, she placed a light kiss on his mouth. His soft chuckle told her she was successful in redirecting his thoughts to more pleasurable pursuits. The gentle way he held her moved her deeply. They savored their private moment, lingering in each other's arms and gazing into each other's eyes, until he eased back and loosened his embrace.

"I've got good news for you," he said, trailing playful kisses across her jaw to her neck.

"And what might that be?" she asked, giggling and struggling to focus on his words while ripples of pleasure radiated through her body.

"I'll tell you during supper. Shall we dine at the Beacon Inn? Or perhaps the Tea Room?"

She hesitated. "I'd planned on having supper here."

He eased her further back in his arms, surprise in his eyes. "An evening out doesn't appeal to you?"

"Oh, it does. In fact, it sounds wonderful. But I promised Willy I'd attempt to cook whatever catch he brings home. He went fishing with Jonathan and his dad. They're out on the water right now, and if I know Willy, he's trying to catch the biggest, scariest creatures he can just to challenge me. He told me to find the black pot because it's large enough to hold an octopus." She laughed. "I've been looking through the cupboards and have only found pots large enough to cook potatoes and vegetables. I hope he was joking about bringing home something with tentacles."

The captain's teeth flashed as he laughed. "I think I know what he intends to catch today. Although it won't be an octopus, it'll take more than a few large pots to accommodate it all."

"Oh, dear. I've been working on my cooking skills, but I'm not proficient at managing the stove yet. One pot, maybe. Two or more? Disaster."

His laugh deepened. "Invite me to dinner and I'll solve your problem."

"Well, of course you're invited! That goes without saying." She

tapped his muscled chest with one finger, adding, “I would have delivered this invitation before now had I known you were back in Crane Landing.”

He lifted her hand, pressing a light kiss to the pad of her finger. “We just made port. I came directly here because I couldn’t wait another minute to see your beautiful face… and to kiss your sweet lips.”

A luscious warmth spread through her.

With a playful growl, he drew her close again. “You have bewitched me, Miss Covington.”

Her soft laughter filled the room. His breath was warm against her skin as he placed a kiss near her temple. Though it lasted just a second, his tender gesture and the moment of closeness felt as endearing as a romantic walk across a sun-filled meadow.

“Keep this up and I’ll be too distracted to manage any cooking whatsoever,” she said, trying to steady herself.

“As you wish.” He gave her a playful spin toward the kitchen area Thomas had added to the cottage years ago. But as soon as they crossed the threshold, he stumbled to a halt, gaping at the mess. Every cupboard, sideboard, and pantry door stood open, and a litter of pots, pans, plates, and bowls were stacked or strewn about. He let out a low whistle. “This is one sweet mess, pretty lady.”

She winced, grabbing a small stack of bowls, thinking to hide at least some of the muddle. But he relieved her of the bowls, laughing as he stored them in the cupboard and continued putting the other things away.

“Willy said I’d need to use the black pot that’s as big as a washtub. But as you can see, I searched every corner of this kitchen and came up empty,” she said, hoping her explanation would excuse the mess she’d made. “There is no black pot here.”

“But there is,” he said, giving her a playful wink. He nodded his head toward the sideboard. “It’s right there.”

She glanced in that direction, seeing nothing more than further

proof of the disarray she'd caused. She had taken nearly everything out of the cupboards to search the farthest darkest corners, and hadn't found any such pot. "Where? I don't… oh, good gracious!" she said, as she finally spied the thing. To the right of the sideboard sat a tall cast iron pot on the floor. It was filled with an umbrella, two walking sticks and a huge bundle of dried sunflowers tied tight together with yellow yarn.

He grinned. "If it was a snake, well… you probably still wouldn't have noticed it."

"You're right, I wouldn't!" She laughed at herself. "All that yellow just sort of draws the eyes away from the pot, don't you think? I honestly never saw it until now."

"Just as well. It's a beastly thing, which is why it sits on the floor and usually holds anything but food. And if you can lift that to the stovetop, Grace, I'm hiring you on as one of *Destiny's* crew members."

"I suspect I'd do a better job as a crew member than as a cook."

They chuckled together at her lack of culinary experience, and it eased her concern. Together they would prepare their supper, and she would continue to learn the domestic skills she hadn't needed as the granddaughter of a wealthy man. She started handing him more bowls from the sideboard, and soon they had everything back in its place.

"What now?" she asked, nodding at the pot doing duty as a catch-all. "If that's too big and heavy and the others are too small, in what pot shall I cook Willy's catch?"

"You'll cook it all in a sandpit." At her confused look, he crooked one finger and motioned for her to follow him. "Your dinner guest is about to earn his supper," he promised, getting the box of safety matches from the mantle of the fireplace, and leading the way out the back door to the beach. Once outside, he grabbed a small shovel housed near the door and headed to the flat outcropping of rock to the left of the docks where a pile of smooth river rock had been heaped.

“You can relax while I dig the pit,” he said, motioning for her to sit on the rock.

“If you show me what to do, I can help.”

“I know you can, but indulge me, won’t you?” His voice took on a husky note as he backed her up to the large rock that was perfect for sitting. “I had this vision of you with the sunlight in your hair and that look you get in your eyes sometimes when you look at me. Yeah. *That* look.” Gently he guided her down. “Now that I’m here, the reality is even better.”

She sat, mesmerized by the adoration in his eyes. “So you thought of me during your trip to Charleston, did you?”

“Only on the way there… and the way back… and every moment in between.”

His tone was playful, but was there truth in his words? She wanted to believe there was.

As he went back to work, digging a hole in the sand, his muscles flexing, his dark hair swinging free at his shoulders, she sat and admired him. What would he think if she told him she had watched for the familiar outline of *Destiny* to make harbor each day? That she’d worried over his safety as one might worry over their lover, as if he were her betrothed or her husband? That in her darkest thoughts, she had feared he might never return from his voyage—like Mary’s dead husband, like her father.

The sound of his shovel slicing through sand assured her that he was right here within arm’s reach—and all the shadowy fears of the past few days dissipated.

“Are you finished?” she asked when he paused with one hand hooked over the top of the shovel handle and his eyes seeming to drink her in.

“No.”

“Do you need my assistance?”

“No.”

She felt a warm flush climb her neck. “Shall I fetch a glass of water or tea for you? You are surely working up a thirst in this hot

sun."

"I am thirsty but not for water or tea."

Oh dear… A wave of intense heat washed across her face.

A knowing grin tilted his lips.

"How do you build a sandpit?" She pointed downward, hoping to divert his attention back to the job at hand and give herself a moment to recover before she melted into a puddle under his adoring gaze. Stirring one finger in the air, encompassing the sand, the shovel, and the river rocks, she said, "Teach me how to do that."

"All right, but you'll have to come over here."

His flirtatious wink made her laugh. "I think your sandpit will get done much quicker if I watch from a distance."

"Ah, I suspect you're right," he said, feigning a dramatic sigh. "All right then, I'm digging a large pit. Just a few more inches, and then I'm going to fill it with those river rocks, get a wood fire going nice and hot over them, and by the time the wood burns to ash the rocks will be as hot as an oven. We'll cook Willy's catch in a blanket of seaweed atop the rocks."

"How very inventive of you, Captain."

"Not my invention at all. It's an ancient way of cooking."

"Will the sandpit work even if Willy happens to bring home an octopus?" she asked jokingly.

"Even if," he said on a laugh. "Since he's with Jonathan's dad, though, I know what they're catching: clams, mussels, and lobster."

Grace sighed and leaned back on the rock. "I'm glad you made port when you did. There's no way I could cook all that, let alone know how to do it." She blew out a breath that puffed her cheeks. "I'm ashamed to admit I never thought I'd need to know how to cook."

Understanding filled his eyes. "You can admit anything to me, and the words will go no further. I'll keep your dark secrets."

Knowing he was trying to ease her concern with humor, Grace pressed her palm to her chest in mock gratitude. "Thank you,

Captain. Rest assured I shall return the favor and protect your unsavory confessions as well."

Although he laughed, something dark moved in his eyes. Guilt? Regret? Sadness? She'd seen flickers of that darkness mingle with flashes of joy and playful romance from the moment she'd opened her door to him an hour earlier. But something heavy was weighing on his mind and it appeared he wasn't willing to share his burden with her. She wanted to respect his privacy, but it hurt to think he couldn't trust her or that he was unwilling to share that depth of intimacy with her. Was this just a flitting romance for him? She remembered the night on Indigo Isle when he'd vowed to commit himself to nothing else until he'd found his family. Did that include romantic commitments?

His eyes suggested he cared for her, but there was something big he was holding back. Perhaps it was just too painful for him to share with her. She had seen his disappointment over not being able to track down his brother Gray in Charleston. That could be the cause of the shadows she saw in his eyes—but her instincts told her otherwise.

Trying to broach the subject in a gentle manner, she said, "You mentioned that you have good news for me. Must I wait until the pit is finished to get the news?"

"Indeed," he said, working the shovel with precision. "I have two inches to go before the pit is ready."

"Are you purposely toying with me, Captain?"

"Just building the anticipation."

"Then you should know anticipation makes me agitated and a bit unpredictable."

He glanced up at her, a wave of dark hair slanting over the one brow that shot up with interest at her remark. "How unpredictable?"

Grace rolled her eyes. "How much deeper do you have to dig?"

He laughed, stabbing the end of shovel into the sand. "You're in luck. I'm done. I'll lay the rocks later."

Her exhale of relief was cut off by the sounds of harnesses in motion and wagon wheels turning atop the clamshell driveway out front. Curious, she stood and shaded her eyes with one hand as she squinted to see who was at the cottage. “I don’t recognize that man,” she said.

“That’s Harvey Cleatis with your surprise.”

She swung her gaze back to her handsome suitor standing in the sandpit, a sheen of sweat on his brow and a smile on his face. “I assume this surprise is what you’ve been baiting me with?”

He nodded and wiped his forehead with his shirt sleeve. “It is.”

“You aren’t moving me out, are you?

Laughing, he launched himself out of the pit. “Not a chance.” He brushed the sand from his trousers and then reached out one strong hand and drew her gently into his arms. He didn’t do anything more than that—just brought her against him and smiled down at her. “Have I mentioned that I missed you?”

“You might have,” she quipped. He smelled of the sea and the sun and the scent she’d missed so much. “I’m glad you’re back.”

“Me too.”

He took her hand, and they threaded their way back to the cottage.

Outside, to the left of the front walkway, were several empty flower boxes, a mound of fresh soil, and a small crate filled with flowers and plant cuttings.

Grace gasped in delight.

“Your flower boxes, my lady,” he said, executing a small bow.

“Oh, Leo… This is far more than I had expected. Thank you. But how did you manage this when you just docked today?”

“I built the planters during the trip to Charleston. As for the plants and soil, Fogg took care of that for me. His brother-in-law owns a greenhouse.”

“Fogg has a sister?”

“Quite a few actually.”

“How is Fogg? And the other crewmen? And your sister and

brother? Tell me everything."

He drew her back into his arms, swaying slightly, as if her keen interest in his friends and family undid him.

"Fogg and the crew are good. As for River…" He hesitated a moment, then said, "She was elated to meet Ashe, and he was deeply moved to see how beautiful and smart our baby sister had become—and how much she resembles Cal. The reunion and our visit were everything I'd hoped for—but Gray wasn't there. No one's heard from him, and River is growing worried. I told her I'd keep checking in, plus do whatever I can to locate him."

She gazed into his troubled eyes. "So it was a bittersweet day then."

He nodded.

"Any news of Cal?"

He shook his head, a quick gesture that held a world of hurt. "Nothing. It's as if he sailed off the ends of the earth."

"I'm so sorry."

"Ashe will continue to check with his London contacts to see if they can uncover some news about our brother, but… I don't know. Even if they find Cal, he might not agree to see us."

"I hope that won't be the case. With you and Ashe reunited, there'll be no stopping the two of you from finding both Gray and Cal. I have every faith in the Sullivan siblings," she said. She'd been reared mostly by her grandfather, and she could discern deep wealth and far-reaching power the moment she met someone. She'd sensed both in Ashe. But even more than those things, she'd detected honor and goodness in him—just as she did in every sinew and muscle in Leo. "Don't forget, Captain, I've witnessed firsthand what you'll do to help a friend. I can only imagine the mountains you'll heave out of your way to find your brothers."

By slow degrees he seemed to disengage from his worries and return to the moment. "I hope you're right."

"I do too," she said.

He linked his hand with hers. "I have something to tell you." He

led her to the front stoop, where they sat down on the top step, side by side. “I didn’t just go to Charleston. I went back to Indigo Isle.”

Grace couldn’t contain her surprise, but then she remembered. “Oh, you went back for your hair tie!”

He hesitated for a second then nodded. “I did—”

“Did you find it?” she asked, cutting him off in her eagerness to learn whether he’d found his treasured item. The bleak look in his eyes brought tears to her own.

“Oh, Leo, I’m terribly sorry. I just thought that might be the *good news* you wanted to share with me.”

He shook his head and remained silent for a moment as if he were still struggling to accept the loss of something so dear to him.

She placed a hand over his clenched fist. “Won’t you tell me why the hair tie means so much to you?”

He sighed. “It doesn’t matter anymore.” Straightening his shoulders, she watched him mentally pack away his loss and heartache. “What I wanted to tell you,” he said, giving her hand a gentle squeeze, “is that the minute Ashe saw the island and your father’s house, he offered to buy it. He loves the house, Grace.”

“Oh…” For a moment, words escaped her. That was good news. Wonderful, in fact, considering her dwindling finances. She and Willy had already discussed selling the home and were both agreed that they should do so. So why didn’t she feel better about it?

“Ashe plans to keep Letta on, if you’ll sell the house to him.”

“I know I should be relieved right now, and I am, but… I don’t know. That house was the dream my father and my mother and I had once shared.” A flood of emotion brought tears to her eyes. She pressed her fingers to her mouth and struggled to stem the surge of loss overwhelming her

Leo drew her against him, sheltering her with one strong arm while she pulled herself together. “You don’t need to sell, you know.”

She had to… for financial reasons. But emotionally? She shook her head, and her throat tightened making it difficult to speak. “I

know that letting go of the property doesn't mean letting go of the memories, but it somehow makes everything more final… like there is no going back."

"You don't have to sell, Grace. If you and Willy want to go back —"

"We don't," she said, interrupting. "My father isn't there." She straightened and met Leo's eyes. "Tell Ashe to make his offer. I can think of no one else I'd want in that house."

"Consider it done."

"All right then," she said, pushing to her feet in an attempt to leave all the heart-wrenching conversation behind them, "before I sink my hands into all that lovely soil you had delivered, I have something to give you. Wait right here." Without giving him a chance to ask questions, she shot into the house and returned a minute later with her hands fisted behind her back. "Which hand?" she asked, and was rewarded with his half smile.

He stood and placed one hand on his hip, head tilted as if in deep consideration. "Left," he said, playing along.

"Excellent guess!" She brought her fist to the front and opened it to reveal a thin strip of soft brown leather.

His gaze moved between her hand and her face. "You bought me a hair tie?"

"I know it can't replace the one you lost, but it is given with—" she'd almost said *love* "—gratitude for all you've done for Willy and me. And on a purely selfish note, it will hold your hair back and allow me to see more of your handsome face."

A grin tilted his lips. "You are an incredible woman, Miss Covington."

"So I've been told." She dangled the tie in front of him. "Would you indulge my desire to see your hair tied back again? I've noticed you haven't tied it in a queue since losing—since we were on the island."

Shadows moved through his eyes again, and she understood that they were both letting go of something precious that day. He was

letting go of the hair tie that signified something emotional and deeply personal for him. She was letting go of her island home that represented the life her father had wanted to give her.

With a flourish, he tilted his chin up and shook his head. His dark mane of hair shimmered in the sun as he scooped it back with both hands.

Mesmerized, Grace longed to comb her fingers through his hair.

"Better?" he asked.

"Hmm… I've got quite the quandary," she said. "Seeing more of your face is surely a benefit but now I'm denied seeing your beautiful hair."

Without warning, he took her into his arms, swept her down the few steps to the ground, and whirled her in a dizzying circle. "You are impossible to please."

In his tight embrace, she laughed and gazed into his eyes. "Everything about you pleases me, Captain. Thank you for the flower boxes," she said, slipping from his embrace and looking out at all he'd arranged for her, even after a busy morning of docking the ship after a long voyage. "This is such a lovely gift. I'd like to plant some flowers now if you're willing to put up the boxes."

"Of course. But first, I have a gift for you."

"A gift? All of this is far more than I could have hoped for," she said, gesturing to the soil and boxes and flowers.

From his pocket, he pulled out a silver necklace with a small silver disk attached. "Happy birthday," he said softly. "I'm sorry I couldn't be here to celebrate your day."

Surprised, she cocked her head and studied him. "I've never shared my birthdate with you. How would you know this?"

"I've known your birthdate for several years, Grace. Each year on your birthday your father would take the *American Lady* as far up the river as possible, as close to Fairview as he could safely get, and shoot up several rounds of fireworks. He never knew if you could see them, but it was the only gift he could give you."

A hard surge of emotion clogged her throat. "That was him?"

she whispered.

A melancholy smile tipped Leo's lips. "Then you saw them?"

She nodded because she couldn't speak. Those beautiful sparkling lights in the sky, sent from the deck of her father's ship, had been a gift from him. He'd once told her if she was lonely to look for him in the stars. And that's where he'd been. In those colorful lights above her… on every birthday. Tears blurred her vision as she struggled to maintain her composure.

"I hope this gift will bring you a measure of joy." Leo placed the necklace on her palm.

A small pearl had been set in the center of an embossed silver disk. She couldn't make out what the design on the disk was, but she knew the necklace was one of a kind. "This is gorgeous," she said, marveling at the simple beauty of the design.

"The metal disk is a button off your father's captain's jacket. I thought you might like a keepsake. The pearl is the birthstone that you and your mother share."

Stunned, she looked into the eyes of the man sweeping her off her feet. "This is one of the most meaningful gifts I've ever received."

"Then you probably shouldn't wear it while you're planting your flowers." He winked and nodded to the mound of soil sitting on the lawn.

That he was trying to lighten the moment was obvious and appreciated. She didn't want every memory associated with her father to be one of sadness. To know that Leo had intended the necklace to be a physical reminder that her father had loved her, that he hadn't forgotten her, moved her deeply.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



Grace and Leo spent the next hour affixing and adjusting the new planters to the undersides of the front windows and then filling them with soil and plants. Their red, white, and pink blooms brought a cozy warmth to the cottage. Next she put her attention on the edgings of the front walk.

The happy sounds of a laughing man, chattering boys, and a barking dog came to Grace just as she dug deep into the mineral-rich soil, intent on transplanting the last of the starter plants Fogg's brother-in-law had delivered.

The shade-loving Blue Mouse Ears, hearty Hosta plants, would be the perfect thing to edge the clamshell walkway, which threaded from the front door of the cottage, around one side, and down to where the rock-strewn beach began. Though she only had enough cuttings to border both sides of the front walk for now, she knew the plants would proliferate. By next summer, she'd have more to divide and transplant—and in a few summers, there would be enough to reach all the way to the end of the walkway out back.

Imagining herself spending summer after summer in Crane Landing living in this pretty cottage sent a wave of warmth and love through her. How wonderful that would be. She closed her eyes, conjuring the blissful image of sharing this oceanside home with Willy—and Leo. But spending her life without Saul… without her grandfather in it left a gaping hole in her chest. Knowing the situation wouldn't change, her heart bled for the family she'd lost.

The sound of Leo's whistle drew her attention. He waved his hand and shouted what sounded like "Whoa!" Or maybe it was "Look out!"

Up to her wrists in dirt, she didn't stand a chance of preparing for the onslaught of wet, smelly dog launching her way. Robbie, the springer spaniel, met her with thick paws that plunged into the dirt around her hands as if seeking whatever stick or bone she was playing with. His body wiggled as his tail wagged and he slobbered wet kisses to her face. Then, he shoved his snout down into the dirt, only to bring it back up again and swipe his tongue against her cheek.

"Yuck!" Grace laughed and sputtered, "Enough already!"

Leo saved her from a furry mauling by getting the dog to heel at his side. "I'm afraid he's still a pup when it comes to manners. Are you all right?"

Still laughing, she dragged the back of one dirt-covered hand across her wet cheek. "I'm fine, but I don't think the same can be said for my skirt or my face."

Leo, patient as always, calmed the dog. Then he walked out to the road to talk with Jonathan's father. Jonathan and Willy, both helping to pull a small wagon laden with pails filled with what Grace could only imagine were lobsters, clams, and mussels, stopped excitedly in front of Leo.

"Look at the haul we got," Willy said, excitement brimming in his voice.

Leo made a show of looking into each bucket. "You boys did well today."

"That's only half of it. The other half is going home with Jonathan and his dad."

Leo winked at Grace, but spoke to Willy. "Go show your sister what we'll be cooking for supper," he said, "then move those plants closer to her so she can finish up the planting. I'll be over in a minute to help."

Grace scrunched her nose at the thought of preparing the food.

She'd rather do the planting and let the men manage the cooking, but if she were going to learn how to cook, she would have to watch and help.

As Leo spoke with Jonathan's father, Willy said goodbye to his friend and brought the loaded wagon right up to the front steps. Robbie bounded along behind him then veered directly toward Grace and nearly bowled her over.

"Down, Robbie!" Willy said, dropping the wagon handle to the ground and hurrying over to Grace. A look of concern shaded his eyes. "Robbie didn't mean it. He gets excited sometimes. Digging in the dirt is his favorite thing to do after catching crayfish. He just wanted to say hello and dig with you. Sorry he got your dress dirty."

"It's okay," she assured him. "I like Robbie's enthusiasm. But now I'm completely covered in dirt and not presentable for company."

Willy frowned. "But Leo and me, we're not company."

"I know that, sweetheart."

He scrunched his brows together as the dog nudged his leg. "Do you? Because sometimes it seems… I just wonder is all."

She sat back on her heels, thunderstruck by her little brother's confession. Is that how it appeared to him? That she was keeping a distance and treating him like a guest instead of family?

But it appeared she was, at least in Willy's eyes, and she realized she'd been so distracted over finances and wondering where she stood in Leo's world that she'd lost track of how Willy was doing in his.

"I haven't meant to be distant, Willy. I guess I'm still getting used to our new life, just as you are." She wrapped one arm about his shoulders and gave a gentle squeeze. "I would do anything for you. You're my whole world."

He seemed to consider her declaration as he scratched the dog's head, then gave a slow nod. "You're all I got too."

That small confession wrung her heart. "Then we'll just have to

take good care of each other, all right?" At his nod, she sought to turn his attention back to the things that made him happy. Fishing and cavorting with a smelly dog. "So what did you catch today?"

He beamed. "You're gonna love it. We got lots of clams and even two lobsters. Come on, I'll show you! Hope you found that big cooking pot."

"You rascal," she teased. "You knew exactly where that pot was, didn't you?"

"Maybe," he said on a laugh, scooting away as she tried to capture and tickle him.

"Well, mister, we won't be using it. Leo dug a sandpit down by the water."

Willy's eyes rounded with excitement. "We're cooking in a sandpit?"

Grace just laughed as Robbie came bumping into her, his tail thumping against her skirts. "We are. And we're selling the house on Indigo Isle to Leo's brother Ashe."

This made Willy pause for a moment, then a look of satisfaction filled his face. "Papa would like that very much. I'm glad it'll be Ashe who owns the place."

"Me too." Though she was sad to have to sell the beautiful home on Indigo Isle, there was no place else she'd rather be than right here in Crane Landing with Willy, Leo, and a very smelly dog.

HOURS AFTER BUNKING down on the *Destiny* and being unable to sleep, Leo climbed out of bed and headed topside. The wind had just picked up. Soon, a storm would sweep in from the south. For now, though, the scent of it was just a whiff on the air, and the clouds scudding inland held only a hint of darkness as they smeared fingers of gray across the face of a full moon.

He listened to the slap of water alongside the hull and the jangle of halyards against the masts. He relished the calming sounds, but it

didn't settle his mind—and that was the problem that kept sleep out of reach and drove him up to the deck at two in the morning. Even now, with all that was going right in his world, the hole in his soul burned like a fresh wound. No matter how many years passed, the moment when his family had been torn asunder lived in his mind as though the horror had happened just yesterday.

How could he move forward into a bright future with Grace when he hadn't kept his promise to reunite his sister and brothers… when what he'd done all those years ago was the very reason they had all been abandoned? His inability to let it go and move on with his life might seem ridiculous to some, but not to him. The memory of Cal's rage and the look in his eyes, as if he'd known he was never coming back and that his life was going to get even worse, would haunt Leo to his dying breath. They'd lived in constant upheaval and fear at home, but at least Cal had had the protection of his older brothers who'd looked out for him. But that small bit of security had been ripped away because of Leo's big mouth.

And now Grace had lost her grandfather and Saul because of Leo's intervention in her life. He could see how deeply she missed them. She'd been deeply wounded, and her anger overshadowed her homesickness, but Leo knew that would pass. She might be too angry to realize it now, but losing one's family was impossible get over. He needed to fix things, to heal the breach between Grace and her grandfather and give her back her family. He owed her that.

And as much as he wanted to commit himself to her, he simply couldn't put his own happiness before his promise to his siblings. He had to find Cal and Gray. He just couldn't move on with his own life until he'd done that. And that's why he wouldn't make commitments to Grace he couldn't keep.

"Can't sleep?" Fogg's voice came from behind Leo, deep and a tad too loud for the time of night.

Leo glanced over his shoulder at his friend and first mate. "I'd blame my restlessness on the storm that's brewing, but that would be a lie. You?"

“Heard footsteps up here. Thought I’d best have a look-see.”

“We’re in Crane Landing now, Fogg. You can rest easy at night. No watches needed.”

“With all due respect, Cap’n, there’s no need for you t’be haunting the decks instead of getting some shut-eye.”

Leo leaned his forearms on the rail, gazing out at the harbor. “Got a few things on my mind is all.”

Fogg moved to stand beside him. “I ‘spect that spending time with Ashe and finding your baby sister has put you at sixes and nines inside that head of yours.”

“Something like that.”

“But you’ve got Thomas’s daughter in your life now and his boy, to boot, so that’s got to be balm for the aches inside, eh?”

“They are at that,” Leo agreed.

“But…?”

Fogg’s question, that single drawn-out word, echoed in Leo’s head. With Gray gone missing and Cal unaccounted for, Leo’s mission to find them was far from complete. How could he reach out for the happiness he knew he could have with Grace? How could he vow to build a life with her and help raise Willy when he hadn’t delivered on an equally crucial promise years ago?

Into the quiet night, Fogg said, “When I was a boy, my great-grandmother’s family tended wild blueberries across a mountaintop, all of the barrens together spanning acres and acres. This was back before the Civil War, and before most people outside of New England even heard of blueberries. I asked her why she and her family worked so hard for something so small.”

Leo glanced over at him, one brow lifting with interest.

Fogg planted an elbow on the railing. “‘The blueberries teach us how to live on even after the worst happens,’ she told me. Frost, drought, the burn after each harvest—none of it stops those wild blueberries from thrivin’ again and again, she’d say. Because most of the plant, more than half, is under the ground, see. It’s protected, able to withstand whatever man and nature might throw at it.”

After a moment, as if giving his words time to sink in, he added, “You can’t take care of others, Cap’n, if you don’t tend your own roots first.”

Leo nodded in understanding. . He couldn’t plant himself anywhere until he knew where his brothers were, until he apologized and did his best to make amends.

“Well then.” Fogg straightened and yawned. “I think I’ll call it a night. Unless o’course, you want t’ talk.”

Leo shook his head. “Go on, get some sleep.”

“Rain’ll be here soon. I wouldn’t linger long.” With that, Fogg headed for the companionway and his berth below deck.

Leo remained at the rail for a long while afterwards, watching as the leaden curtain of rain came inland. By the time it reached him, his thoughts were darker than the sky. He didn’t care that the wind whipped about or that the rain drenched his clothing, stinging his skin. The relentless pounding massaged the ache in him and served as a reminder of what needed to be done before anything else. He couldn’t grab for his own happiness until he learned what troubled Gray so much that he was avoiding his parents and River back in Charleston… and not until he found Cal and made amends for whatever hell his life had been—or to save him from the hell it had become. Because as sure as the rain soaking his clothes, Leo knew Cal had suffered the worst among his siblings.

He had to find them—because it was the only way he could settle his past and embrace a future with Grace.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



The month of June had been filled with sunny days and warm nights, visiting with friends, weekend picnics, and moments that filled Grace's heart to overflowing. She spent her time with Willy and tending the home she loved. Leo joined them nearly every evening and on weekends except for the two weeks when he'd run *Destiny* down the coast to visit River and take Ashe to Indigo Isle.

Grace had never known such freedom or felt so light of heart. She couldn't have imagined a life like this. But now she couldn't imagine ever going back to the sequestered life she'd lived at Fairview. Still, she wished she could visit, that she could hug Saul and find a way to forgive her grandfather. As her eyes took in the festivities around her, she knew she'd found her place in the world. She just wished it hadn't been at the expense of her former life.

"It's quite a sight isn't it?" Rebecca asked from where she sat on a blanket near her little boy.

Joining her, Grace settled herself beside her friend, careful not to wake Finn. "I can't believe all we've accomplished today."

The small boat landing before them now sported red, white, and blue bunting, while up and down the riverbanks could be seen various locations created especially for families to gather. There were lounging chairs, hammocks, and numerous picnic areas, all festooned for Founders Day and ready to serve as ideal places from which to view the annual boat parade that would begin tomorrow after brunch. Along each bank of the river were also unlit torches

waiting to be kindled at dusk tomorrow evening, a sight Grace looked forward to seeing.

"This is all so beautiful," Grace said, her eyes drinking in the festive grounds.

"For an entire week, the banks of the Crane River will be filled with happy people celebrating Founder's Day and Independence Day," Rebecca declared, her brown eyes filled with warmth and friendship as she smiled at Grace. "It's such a joyful time for our town."

Grace could feel the energy of happy people in the air around her.

Behind her and Rebecca, on the sea of green grass spreading up and out from the banks of the river, were other townspeople finishing final preparations for the festivities.

"I've never attended something like this," Grace confessed. "What exactly happens during Founders Day?"

Rebecca grinned. "Probably a few marriage proposals. Definitely some stolen kisses between sweethearts." She laughed. "It's a celebration that sparks spontaneity and a tad of reckless behavior in everyone. As for the events of the day, it all begins at the church. There's a service and brunch there, and then we all head down to the river for the children's boat parade at one o'clock. After that, it becomes more of a 'timber fair,' with food stands open for business and all kinds of woodsman competitions."

"Ah, so that's what is being set up behind us."

Rebecca nodded. "There will be chopping and sawing challenges, and even an axe throw—which Leo excels at," she added in a low tone of voice that wouldn't carry to Leo and Adam who worked nearby. "Wait until you see the competition. With men posturing and heckling one another, and axes being thrown through the air, it's both hilarious and terrifying."

Grace cringed. "Do I really want to see that?"

Rebecca laughed. "You'll enjoy it. And no need to worry about Leo. He's quite skilled with an axe."

Heat rushed to Grace's face. "Am I that obvious?"

Rebecca grinned. "Definitely."

They both laughed, though quietly. They didn't want to wake Finn, who had finally sat down on his rump long enough for exhaustion to overtake him. His soft snuffles could be heard from the other corner of the blanket where they had propped an umbrella on its side to shade him from the sun.

Grace hooked a thumb at the little bundle of boy. "I'm surprised I'm not napping alongside him. I don't think I've ever worked harder than I have with you today, yet I'm not even tired. Just… happy. Thank you for allowing me to help."

Rebecca surprised her by leaning in for a quick, sisterly side hug. "Dear Grace, I wasn't going to let you escape! If you haven't noticed, your help was a godsend, and I'm thrilled to have the presence of another female, and friend, in my life. I can't wait to have a little girl in our house to balance things out." She winked at Grace, and in a soft voice called out to her husband, "I'd like one soon, Adam."

Rebecca's handsome husband, a man Grace had come to deeply admire, paused in his work of pounding in a nail on the lemonade stand he was building with Tyler, Willy, and Leo. He glanced over at his wife, a world of love in his gaze. "One what, sweetheart?" He put two nails between his white teeth, readying them to use next.

"A little girl. With you and Finn—and now Tyler here for his visit—you fellas are outnumbering me at home."

He grinned at her around the nails, then took them out of his mouth. "We can get to work tipping the scales the other way. Just say the word."

"*The word*," she said, her tone playful but promising.

His gaze turned smoky, promising all the passion she desired.

Grace wanted what Adam and Rebecca shared, their playful love and the easiness she sensed was at the core of their happy marriage. She would have had friendship with Devon, but not the spark she felt with Leo.

But what did Leo want?

From beneath lowered lashes, she watched as he cut the last slab of wood for the lemonade stand, his muscled forearms showing to advantage with his sleeves rolled up and the sun coating his golden-hued skin. Everything about him was strong, honed… and beautiful.

Could a man be termed beautiful?

Leo was. Exquisitely.

Since meeting him, she'd felt her breath hitch in her throat every time their gazes caught—which they were doing now. Her heart picked up pace and her face warmed.

Instead of looking away or acting as if he didn't notice her scrutiny, he boldly held her gaze.

Her insides melted like a honeycomb under a hot sun. The slow upward tilt of his full lips told her he, too, was thinking about their private moments. Every time their mouths met it was just as thrilling as the first time he'd kissed her on the beach at Indigo Isle.

The memory of that wondrous moment, that first kiss, washed over her, transporting her back to that thrilling night. Moonlight and shadows had played over him, giving her glimpses of his handsome face and manly body as an island breeze caressed them. In that moment, with her sitting beside him, and his guitar forgotten on his knee, time had stopped. Holding the guitar with one hand, he'd cupped his other hand, so warm and gentle, on the back of her neck… and he'd drawn her into a kiss she would never forget. Their first kiss. Her first experience of feeling the earth move and her heart soar—and discovering the staggering truth that she wanted more than friendship in a marriage. She wanted passion and love with a playmate and partner with whom to embrace each day.

A shout from Willy jolted her back to the present and the busy park, away from the midnight moment she'd shared with Leo.

Willy was gesturing wildly to Tyler, explaining that a fish the size of a whale had just jumped straight up out of the water and then dove back down into the river. Both boys dropped the small pieces of wood they had been holding for Leo and Adam and then

darted for the riverbank.

Adam just laughed, shaking his head as he watched the boys dash away.

Leo grinned, too, but his dark, liquid gaze lingered on Grace.

She felt the caress like a stroke of his palm across her cheek and down her neck. That night on the beach in his embrace, his warm lips had ignited a dream within her, had swirled around her until she'd felt dizzy with longing for love… for a life filled with joy, with family, with… Leo. Since that night he had made his desire clear each time he looked at her. But did he want love and passion and a life with her? Or just passion?

How was she to know?

Straightening, she mentally pulled away from the dreamy memories and nagging questions. She couldn't afford to depend on Leo or anybody else. She had to make her own way now. If her grandfather's betrayal had taught her anything, it was that.

As if Leo realized the spell between them had broken, he gave her a playful wink and went back to work on the lemonade stand.

Rebecca leaned over and fanned Grace's burning face with a plate from the nearby picnic basket they had filled earlier with snacks. "The look Leo gave you just now could have charmed—and boiled!—the juice from a low-bush blueberry," she whispered, setting down the plate and passing a mason jar of cool water to Grace.

Face burning, Grace released a giddy sounding laugh, feeling deeply grateful that she and Rebecca were already great friends. She took a sip, then said, "You know, you sounded remarkably like Fogg just now with that low-bush blueberry comment."

"Oh, dear. Did I?"

"Your analogy did."

"If I'm starting to talk like Fogg, I've been away from Fredonia too long." Rebecca sighed and rested her hands on her lap. "I must admit I adore Fogg. He's a frequent guest in our home. Adam and I genuinely enjoy his interesting observations and thoughts about the

world, but his expressions and verbal storytelling are like watching a one-man show. We are absolutely mesmerized by the man."

"I am, too, when I can understand him."

They laughed together as they got to work unpacking the picnic basket so that everyone could enjoy an afternoon snack.

Rebecca's easy friendship had linked Grace to this place and this land, just as Leo had done. The warmth and happiness she'd found in Rebecca and Adam's friendship and their lovely home made her all the more determined to create a similar beautiful space. But could she create such a home without Leo? Because she might have to. He'd given her no promises. He kept his past shut away from her. He never talked about their future together.

As her gaze shifted to the men, she saw that Leo and Adam were now helping Willy and Tyler add the last few touches to the stand, the jumping fish in the water forgotten for the moment. Leo and Willy had painted the sign that advertised a cup of the sweet lemon water for just three cents. Together, they attached it to the front of the stand, then all four males stepped back to admire their handiwork.

"It's perfect," Rebecca announced, getting to her feet, and heading for Adam. On her way, she ruffled Tyler's hair just as her husband drew her against his side and embraced her with one strong arm. With his free hand, he pulled her little brother back and against the front of his legs. They were such a lovely, loving family… so generous and welcoming to everyone, including Grace and Willy.

For Grace, it seemed a lifetime ago, back when her parents were alive, that she had felt the true warmth of a happy family. She had Willy now for which she was deeply grateful. She and her little brother were creating their own family here in this beautiful oceanside town, but something was missing. Their parents for one thing. But for Grace, it was the absence of what she saw between Rebecca and Adam that left a gaping hole in her heart. It was the love and companionship shared between two people who would

move mountains for each other. She longed for that depth of love and companionship.

She shared a passionate attraction and warm friendship with Leo. But was it possible they could share something more? Something deeper that would bind their hearts in love as joyfully as Adam and Rebecca Grayson's hearts were joined?

Before her thoughts could carry her away, the man who'd been consuming her every thought was beside her, motioning with just a nod of his head toward the stand. "Willy wants you to see what he carved into the back side of it," he said.

Curious, she moved toward the stand, the brief touch of Leo's warm palm at the base of her spine—there and then gone—whisking her breath away.

Willy caught her hand and pulled her around to the back of the stand. "Lookee here, Grace. See it?" His voice was an octave higher than usual he was so excited by the immensity of the manly project he'd just helped to finish.

"I do," she said, imbuing the words with a sense of wonder. "Tell me about it, won't you?" She sincerely hoped he would because she honestly could not read it. It might have been everyone's initials. Or maybe the date. Or maybe….

"It's a boat! Leo's boat. It brought us all here—you, me, even the lemons!"

Grace concentrated on the staggered lines crudely dug into the wood with what she knew was not at all a sharp knife point. Gradually the outline of Leo's schooner and its two masts could be seen.

"Ah, there it is—how wonderful, Willy. I love it. And I had no idea we'd brought lemons back. But from where?"

Willy shrugged. "I dunno. Down below decks?"

Leo leaned down and circled Willy's thin chest in a mock wrestler's hold. "You think I grow lemons in the hold, do you?"

"Maybe," Willy replied, obviously joking, and happily playing along.

“For your information, I grow a whole crop of lemon trees in the hold.”

Willy burst out laughing. “Do not!”

Leo laughed, too, and set the boy free. “I bought those lemons in Charleston for Founders Day.”

Still grinning, Willy danced back a step to put himself out of Leo’s reach. “May I stay with Tyler tonight? Mr. and Mrs. Grayson said I could. That way, Tyler and I can finish painting our sail for the boat parade.”

Leo arched an eyebrow at Willy. “You need to ask your sister’s permission.”

Chagrined, Willy cast a hopeful look at Grace.

She turned to Rebecca and Adam to be certain that her little brother hadn’t invited himself to their house. “Are you sure you want two boys in your home tonight?”

“Of course. Having Willy and Tyler overnight gives Finn two playmates. He loves all the attention.”

“Then it’s settled. Now let’s eat,” Adam announced, putting emphasis on the last two words. “We men have worked up an appetite, haven’t we, Tyler?”

The ten-year-old boy gazed up at Adam with eyes full of respect and admiration, obviously a fan of his older sister’s husband. Grace had learned that Adam had been part of the Grayson family since he was thirteen years old and had always been in Tyler’s life. It made sense the boy would feel connected to him.

Nodding exuberantly, Tyler dashed for the picnic blanket with Willy following close on his heels.

They all took their time enjoying the sandwiches and cold salads Grace and Rebecca had prepared, each of them finding a relaxing spot atop the huge blanket. Even Finn rolled over, fresh-eyed from his nap, babbling and grinning at everyone, and then happily devouring anything and everything his mama handed to him.

An hour or so later, with all the provisions stowed away, and the lemonade stand needing only a supply of lemons, water, and sugar

for tomorrow, they all said their goodbyes. Willy headed home with Adam, Rebecca, and the boys, while Leo and Grace headed back to the cottage.

At her door, he handed her the picnic basket he'd carried. "I'd like to show you something, if you aren't too tired to take a walk."

She took the basket in one hand, opening the door with the other. "Of course. What? And where?"

He cast her one of those grins that could unspool the breath from her body. "Something. Somewhere."

She laughed, knowing if she hadn't, she might have just swooned instead. "So a young lady is supposed to just head off into the unknown with you, as simple as that?"

He leaned one shoulder against the door jamb, his lids getting heavy, as though the sight of her intoxicated him... as though he was planning and plotting something private they would both enjoy.

"Not just any young lady. Only you. And yeah. As simple as that."

She felt a little off kilter herself; Leo's nearness—and his words—did that to her.

"I can hardly stand the suspense," she murmured.

He laughed and took the basket from her hands, depositing it inside the door.

"Should I change?" she asked.

"Not unless you want to."

"I mean… do I need to dress up, dress down?"

He leaned in, cupped her cheek in one hand, and pressed a playful kiss to her forehead. "Beautiful lady, have you ever in your life 'dressed down'? Wear whatever makes you happiest. If it helps to know, I'm taking you to the shore. We won't be back until after dark."

She cocked her head, her curiosity mounting, but she withheld the questions streaming through her mind. Reluctantly, she stepped away. "I'll only be a few minutes."

The look he gave her said he hoped she'd be back in less than one.

She headed up the stairs but stopped on the third step, turning back, and saying, "Gracious! I didn't mean to leave you standing at the door. Please, come in. Help yourself to whatever you need. After all, it's your house."

"Think I'll grab a clean shirt. If you don't mind, that is. I've got a few stored in the keeping room." He stepped inside, shutting the door behind him, and began to strip off his shirt.

For a moment, Grace stood stunned, her gaze glued to Leo and his manly shoulders that were quickly exposed. She hadn't meant to witness his disrobing, but he hadn't given her a moment's notice as he crossed the room unbuttoning and tugging off his shirt. Face flaming with heat, she turned, intending to rush up the stairs, but her trembling legs threatened to give out and send her tumbling back downstairs. Once inside her room, she leaned back against the closed door and tried to catch her breath.

Rebecca's words about stolen kisses and marriage proposals and reckless behavior happening on Founder's Day bloomed in Grace's brain. Could one of those things be what Leo planned for tonight… tomorrow… ever?

If so, would it be a kiss?

Or perhaps reckless behavior? What would a man like Captain Leo Sullivan deem reckless behavior?

Pressing one hand against her chest, she tried but failed to stop her heart from taking flight. Too excited to contain herself, she pushed away from the door and cautioned herself not to harbor expectations in her mind or in her heart.

But they were there just the same.

A few moments later, she pulled on a fresh white blouse, dark blue skirt, and hose, and then slipped into the softest half-boots she owned. On a whim, she uncoiled her hair from the top knot she had worn throughout the day and let the long strands fall free in thick waves, tying them only with a single blue ribbon a few inches from

the ends. That done, she took a deep breath, grabbed a short-waisted jacket, and headed back downstairs to unravel the mystery that Leo and their private evening presented.

Chapter Thirty



Leo led Grace along the narrow, sand-strewn path, her hand clasped in his as she trailed slightly behind. He kept their pace lively because he didn't want her to miss the special moment that would happen whether they were there or not.

Her bright smile in the slanting sunlight suggested she didn't mind their momentum. He sensed she was as eager as he to reach their destination. Only she didn't know what wondrous event was awaiting them.

"Almost there," he said, the unlit lantern in his other hand squeaking against its hinges as they walked.

The pathway finally flared out, leaving room enough for them to walk side by side. He drew her next to him with a slight tug on her hand. She came with a laugh and that fresh, beautiful scent of lavender and lemon balm that was hers alone.

"I like it through here," she said. "What do you call this place?"

"One of my favorite places in Crane Landing." He slanted a grin her way

"I mean, what's its name?"

Hands still clasped, he tucked her arm under the crook of his, admiring how she could feel both strong and feminine. "Not sure, exactly. I know it has been given a few names through the years by the locals. Your dad used to call it 'the path that points home.'"

Mention of her father always seemed to pique her interest as if she were hungry for every scrap of detail she'd missed out on. "I

have no idea what that means," she said.

"The answer to that question just happens to be what I intended to show you this evening."

A few minutes later the path gave way to a secluded inlet with a rocky beach. There were a few isolated areas of uninterrupted sand perfect for shore fishing or picnicking. Otherwise, it was a cool, green oasis of coastal stone surrounded by stands of tamarack and black spruce trees.

"Oh, my…" She drew in an audible breath. "It's absolutely breathtaking."

"It is," Leo agreed. "But the view I want you to see isn't on shore." He motioned to where a twelve-foot, flat-bottomed skiff was tethered to a low-slung limb. "Will you trust me to take you out into the middle of the cove?"

"I trust you, but…" She eyed the boat. "It's safe?"

"Built her myself. Been using her for years."

"All right then. I'll take my chances."

Within seconds, he had the rope untethered and Grace kneeling atop the old quilts he had put down in the skiff for comfort atop the boards. He lit the lantern and left it sitting atop a high shelf of rocks for their return and then pushed off from shore.

He poled the short distance to the middle where the water was smooth as a mirror and nearly motionless. The air, just a tad cool, held the earthy scents of woodland and wetness. Nearby, in the shadows of the tamarack stand, a small mink explored along the rocky shore before slipping into the water with a slight splash and swimming fast away.

Grace watched as it disappeared around the curve of land that jutted out into the water. "My father visited here often?"

"He brought me fishing here a few times each summer. But he found it years before I came to Crane Landing, so I suspect he spent more than his share of time exploring the cove."

"I can see why he would have. There's something almost mystical about this place. It's so peaceful but also filled with life.

And the view is… well, it's beyond beautiful."

He took in the view with great relish. "I never get tired of seeing that stretch of water out there, but I what I really want you to see tonight is going to show up right about… there." He pointed up and behind her left shoulder. "You'll see it best if you sit here beside me."

After helping her maneuver around, he stored the pole and then settled down beside her.

"Won't we float away without the pole in the water or an anchor to hold us?" she asked, sounding a little uncertain of sitting in a skiff in the middle of the cove.

"We won't get pulled out to the ocean if that's a worry. The tide will be incoming—and it's another reason I was hoping you'd come here with me tonight."

"You want to show me an incoming tide?"

"I do," he said, then fell silent as dusk dropped around them, cloaking the water, darkening the line of trees. "There," he murmured, "feel that?"

Grace stilled. "You mean the breeze?"

He shook his head. "The water is rising and lifting the boat by small degrees, but it isn't pushing us yet."

Her face went from intense concentration to sudden joy as she drew in a breath. "I do feel it." She studied him in the gathering darkness. "Is that why you left the lantern sitting high atop the rocks instead of on the ground?" At his nod, she asked, "Will the water be so high by the time we return to land?"

"No, not that high. It'll be a bit lower. We'll arrive safe and dry." A second later, he asked, "See those stars directly ahead?" At her nod, he added, "They're why your dad dubbed this 'the place that points home.' Our cottage is right at the tip of where those stars meet at the southern end."

"Our cottage?" she asked softly.

He hadn't realized what he'd said. "It was left to me but it's your home," he clarified. Until he was free to make commitments the

cottage was *hers*, not theirs.

“I’m glad he made a good home here with Willy,” she said. “I’m glad my father had a son to love, and that Willy had such a wonderful father.”

“For you to say that means you’ve come a long way, Grace.”

“I know,” she said as if it surprised her too. “Although I wish Papa could have found a way to circumvent my grandfather's vengeance and bring me back to Crane Landing with him and Willy, I understand why he couldn't put Willy at risk to do so.”

Instead of hearing melancholy in her voice, Leo heard forgiveness and acceptance and love. He hoped she’d be able to do the same for her grandfather someday.

The water swelled another several inches around them, and he enjoyed the play of emotions that crossed her beautiful face.

“Are you certain we’ll be all right?” she asked. “The boat is feeling suddenly small and ineffectual in this big body of water.”

“We’ll be fine,” he promised—and they would. “I built this skiff myself with a new Josiah Ross wood planer and with every piece of good advice I ever learned from Cyrus, your father, and from the men at Crane and Grayson Ship Building.”

He watched as she visibly relaxed, her implicit trust in him causing both pleasure and concern. The memory of how his siblings had trusted him to make the best choices for them—and how he had failed so miserably at his job as their big brother—made him uncomfortable with anyone putting their trust in him. He couldn’t bear to let Grace down, but that was a real possibility if he made promises he couldn’t keep.

“What is it?” she asked. “Is there a problem with the boat?”

That she noticed the change in him, the divergence of his thoughts, was so intuitive it unnerved him. His fist inclination was to tell her it was nothing and brush off his momentary lapse as something completely unrelated. But he couldn’t do it. She deserved an honest answer.

“I was thinking of my brothers and sister, and how I wish I

could have kept us together," he admitted. "Family is everything, Grace. It's important not to take it for granted or to let anger fracture those bonds."

Sympathy pooled in her eyes, and he wondered if she'd caught his nudge to reach out to her grandfather. "You're a good man, Leo, and a loving brother." She slipped her soft palm over his clenched knuckles, her warm presence and beautiful scent surrounding him. "I'm sorry for all you and your siblings have had to bear. It's a heavy burden for sure, but you've seen for yourself that the separation, however heart-wrenching, has yielded a better life for Ashe, Gray, and River—and for you and Benny, if I'm not mistaken."

He acknowledged her observation with a nod. The five of them had eventually found better homes, for which he would be eternally grateful. But what about Cal? Not knowing what had happened to his younger brother gnawed relentlessly at his gut.

"Ashe's connections in London have dug up some information on Cal," he said. "I was going to tell you about this tomorrow after the festivities, but Ashe and I are heading to London in three days to see if we can track down our little brother."

Her brows lifted in surprise. "You're leaving again?"

"I have to go, Grace."

She nodded as if she understood, but her expression suggested she was concerned. "How long will you be gone?"

"I don't know. Three weeks or so I would guess."

"Oh…"

Seeing her so crestfallen made him want to kick himself for sharing this with her now when he'd wanted to make this moment something she'd remember forever.

"Well then…" She inhaled and straightened her shoulders as if accepting something she couldn't change. "When you find Cal, you must convince him to come to Crane Landing. We can invite the rest of your siblings and give Cal a welcome home celebration he'll never forget," she said softly.

Her earnest desire to help him reunite with his family lifted his heart like the rising tide that was lifting their boat.

“Thank you, Grace. I’m not sure Cal would agree to meet with us, but if we can find him, and he does agree to see me, I suspect he’ll insist on doing so in private.”

“I hope that happens,” she said, a gentle smile lifting her lips. “Now tell me, is it my imagination or is our boat rising up at an alarming rate?”

He grinned at her barely camouflaged concern. “It is indeed, and so is my appreciation of you.”

At her look of astonishment, he turned his palm up and linked fingers with her. “Thank you for understanding.”

She glanced at their hands and then looked up at him, the blue of her eyes catching the starlight that was just beginning to shine. “Your love for your family is easy to understand, and your dedication to them is admirable. You’re a good man, Captain Sullivan.”

“Thank you.” He gave her fingers a gentle squeeze. “Have I mentioned that I’m glad I was the one who pulled you from the Schuylkill River—and that you decided to head to Crane Landing with me?”

“Not once,” she said, but her smile faded.

He could see a deep sadness in her eyes for all she’d lost, most recently her father to death and her grandfather to lies. The first was a wound that would heal but be forever tender. The second was weight that would grow heavier day by day, year by year, and eventually crush all hope, love, or joy from her life.

That’s why Leo had visited her grandfather only days ago during his last run down the coast. He’d needed to confess his part in Grace’s abduction, and tell Fairview where he could find his granddaughter, but he’d warned the man not to hurt her again.

“You’re deep in thought,” she said softly.

“I’m just thinking about how glad I am that you’re here with me.”

Her gaze lingered and tangled with his. “Is that why you brought me to this cove?” she asked on a whisper. “To tell me that you enjoy my company?”

“It is,” he said, “and also so you could experience the power and wonder of a spring tide.”

A look of puzzlement crossed her face. “But it’s summer. Are there still spring tides at this time of year?”

He grinned because she was so adorable. “I asked your father the same questions the first time he brought me here.”

Her eyes brightened with interest. “And what did he say?”

“He told me I couldn’t truly understand the power of nature or the force of life until I was out on the ocean. There are surface currents, he said, and deep-water currents too—and to help me understand what each could be like, he brought me here during a spring tide, which happens two times each lunar month.”

While they talked, the skiff rose and rose, like a cork inside a glass bottle being filled with wine.

“Gracious! I feel as if we might be propelled up to the tops of the trees with the water swelling beneath us,” she exclaimed, her voice a mix of apprehension and excitement. She sat up straight. Attentive to the point of being anxious, but still appearing to trust him. “Is the tide going to get higher?”

“In a few seconds, you’ll know,” he replied, thoroughly captivated by her enjoyment. “Grace, hold tight to my hand now and also to your side of the boat. That’s it. A good tight hold.”

She did as he said, and within seconds the current caught at the skiff and swished it inland, right to the banks of the shore and beneath the area where Leo had left the lantern.

Fast as lightening, he exited the boat, drawing Grace up and out onto dry land, then tied up the skiff for its retrieval later.

“Oh my,” she gasped, laughing joyfully as he led her a few feet inland, “so that’s a spring tide!”

“Spectacular, isn’t it? They spring forth out of nowhere it seems.”

“I loved it!” she exclaimed. “The gathering of the water and then how swiftly and surely it moved us—it was utterly fascinating and… exhilarating.”

He fetched the lantern, watching as her gorgeous face came more clearly into view as he returned to her. “It’s exactly what you’ve done to me. Like a spring tide, Grace, you’ve lifted me up and swept me away. Looking into your eyes is like staring deep into the ocean where currents move, and storms brew, and porpoises play. I can’t look away because I am thoroughly captivated by you.”

Her breath escaped on a soft sigh. Lantern light cast a golden glow across her hair.

As he cupped her beautiful face in his shaking hands, he gazed deep into the eyes of the woman who was stealing his heart. He wanted so much for them. But he couldn’t give her anything more than moments like this until he settled his past—and she dealt with hers. He knew that, and yet…

With a light touch of his knuckles beneath her chin, he tipped her face upward.

Her lips parted slightly as she drew in a breath, her eyes drifting closed.

Taking that as an invitation, he lowered his mouth to hers. The softness of her lips meeting his with sweet welcoming warmth stirred his blood, flooded his heart, shook his control. Her body moved into his like a sail seeking wind—and he wanted to be the wind that moved her, the elemental force that could fill her days with joy and her nights with passion.

He drew his knuckles along the arc of her jawbone, then up to the shell of her ear, learning the planes and curves of the woman who was changing his world. At her hairline, he uncurled his fingers, letting each one tunnel into the soft, silky strands of her golden tresses as he lost himself in the moment… in her.

His heart banged like a drum under the tent of night. Could she hear? Did she realize how profoundly she affected him?

From the moment he’d pulled this beautiful woman from the

Schuylkill River, every thought in his head, every hope in his heart centered around her. And now he held her in his arms, atop land that he revered, near the ocean that he loved.

Life, which had taken so much from him, was suddenly sweet and giving.

He softened his kiss, learning the bow of her upper lip and the pouty perfection of the bottom. She tasted of blueberries, smelled like lemons, and radiated the warmth of the day spent along Crane River with their friends and the kids. He would never forget it. Not the day, not this night, and never, ever this woman.

Threading his fingers together at the nape of her neck, he gently ended their kiss and gazed into her dreamy eyes. "I'm falling for you, Grace."

SHE HEARD LEO'S VOICE, just a husk of sound, hoarse and strained as if he were holding himself in check. His strong hands slid down her arms and circled her waist, forcing a small gasp of pleasure from her. Bracing one hand against his hard chest where his heart thudded beneath her palm, she looked into his dark eyes. "You're falling for me?"

He nodded. "Yes, but don't let me take this too far."

"Too far? Where are you planning on taking me?"

"Somewhere you might not want to go."

"I love a good adventure," she whispered, shocking herself with her boldness and daring repartee.

He gazed down at her as if trying to imprint the moment on his soul. "You're like trying to navigate an ocean, Grace. Just one surprising and wondrous moment after another."

"What better way to win a captain's heart?"

"Is that what you've been plotting?"

She gazed up at him, the highhanded, bold man who'd kidnapped her, who'd defied her demands, who'd breached her

defenses, who'd shown her a world she'd never known existed, who'd introduced her to freedom and joy and… *love*? In that moment, she knew with certainty that she'd found the rest of her life in this man's arms. But what did he feel? What had he meant by *falling for you*? Did he mean physically? Or emotionally?

"I'll never confess to plotting," she said. "But I like where we're going."

"Then I shall stay the course, my lady." And with that he kissed her again.

It was not the tentative, gentlemanly kiss he'd given her before. It was a kiss that made her weak in the knees and the ocean roar in her ears and the sand shift beneath her feet.

His shoulder muscles tightened beneath her palms as he drew her deeper into his arms. A hum filled her ears as she embraced him, hanging on to the man and the hope that her dream of building a full and joyful life with him, right here in Crane Landing, could truly become a reality. But did *going too far* for him mean falling in love, or marriage, or just crossing a line they shouldn't cross?

"I didn't mean to overstep," he said, his voice gruff as he eased away and put some distance between them.

"You haven't. You are amazing me."

The crease between his brows flattened with apparent relief and then a mischievous expression lit his face. "So my lady likes to be kissed?"

She arched an eyebrow at him. "Apparently she does, providing it's by you."

In the hoop of the lantern's light, he angled a pleased grin down at her. She could have lingered there forever, but he said, "We should go before I lead us too far off course."

Fighting her disappointment, she quipped, "I might enjoy the adventure."

"I won't take advantage of you, Grace."

Her face warmed but she boldly met his eyes. "Thank you, but

it's not taking advantage if I give permission," she answered honestly. The surprise in his eyes made her smile despite her concern over what might be going on in his head and heart.

"But it is." Then, without warning, her dark-eyed, long-haired, too handsome suitor swept her up in his arms and swung her in a full circle, carefully avoiding the lantern. She shrieked with laughter as he set her back on her feet. "I can assure you, Grace, kissing you has been the highlight of my life. But before I do something rash, I'd best get you home."

"You mean more rash than kidnapping me?" she teased, not wanting their night to end.

"Yes," he said, his eyes smoky and serious, and she knew that whatever thoughts were in his mind they were definitely rash… and wildly exciting. The captain was on the brink of *taking things too far*.

He leaned down and scooped up the lantern. A second later, they headed for the path leading home, hands clasped, shoulders brushing against one another as they navigated the night-shadowed path together.

Chapter Thirty-One



In the hush of early morning, just as the songbirds began to sing, Grace came awake in the huge bed that Leo had once slept in. Its cotton sheets, downy pillows, and hand-stitched quilt cocooned her body in softness while memories of last night echoed through her mind.

Recalling the gentle way he'd held her as he'd kissed her, the thrill of hearing him say *I'm falling for you*, made her sigh. What had that meant? When he'd walked her home last night after their thrilling interlude at the cove, it seemed she had moved on air, guided by his strong hand holding hers, and buoyed by the low, intimate words he'd whispered to her beneath the stars. Even now, the woodsy scent of his shaving cream lingered in the waves of her hair and at the nape of her neck where he'd kissed her.

She had intentionally awakened early this morning, wanting to mull over her evening with him—because something special had happened between them last night. In that dark cove, scented of ocean and pine, they had allowed themselves to be vulnerable and honest with each other. He'd even warned her not to let him take things too far—but she'd already gone too far.

And that scared her. Because if his heart wasn't involved then she was heading for heartbreak.

Though it was hours from when he would be at her door to pick her up, she felt his presence as clearly as the yellow warbler singing its song on her outer windowsill. Sitting up, she stretched her arms

over her head, and tipped her face into the morning's light. Today she intended to ask Leo what he'd meant by *taking things too far*… and to be clear about his feelings for her before he left for London. He'd said he was *falling for her,* but that could mean any number of things. She couldn't wait weeks to have such an important conversation. And she couldn't afford to get any closer to his flame thinking it would be her comfort and warmth for life only to be burned to the ground.

THE SIGHT of Leo at her door, freshly shaved and painfully handsome with his hair secured in a queue with the tie she'd given him, made Grace's head swim as if she'd peered over the edge of a mountain precipice into a deep valley below. One false step and she could indeed take things too far. She just hoped it would take her into Leo's arms and not off the edge of a mountain.

His strong arms kept her steady as he escorted her to church service. Afterward, beneath a cobalt blue sky flagged by fluffy clouds, a large and lively crowd of people fanned out from the churchyard to the riverbank to the wide expanse of verdant green grass spreading out from the small incline there. The latter was where the bulk of the day's entertainment would take place as soon as the children's boat parade on Crane River had ended.

The children were adorable with their patched together boats, some of them barely seaworthy. Two boats tipped over and sank the minute they were cast into the river. The other boats, fueled by a steady breeze, jostled for position, bumping, and tilting as they moved across the water. Oohs and aahs and chuckles rippled through the crowd as the boats bobbed along on the current.

Willy and Tyler had decorated the small sailboat that Leo and Adam had furnished them for the boat parade. Grace enjoyed watching the boys, their eyes bright with excitement as they navigated the short parade route, each of them wearing a seaman's

cap loaned to them by members of Leo's crew. Little by little, Grace could see that Willy's heart was healing as he adjusted to life here without their father.

The sting in her own heart wasn't quite as sharp now. Living here, caring for her brother, being with Leo… all of it made fertile ground for healing and happiness.

As the parade ended, Willy and Tyler's boat came in third place.

"That stinks," Willy said, a pout on his face.

"Whoa, mister." Leo pulled both boys aside. "Did Matthew and Davey cheat?"

"No, sir," the boys said in unison, sullen expressions on their faces.

"Did you see them working hard on their boat all week?"

"Yes, sir," Willy said, and Tyler nodded.

"Was their boat seaworthy and their sails sturdy and full?"

Willy nodded. "It was, but I don't know how theirs was so much better than ours."

"Why don't you ask them when you congratulate them on their win?" Leo suggested, a meaningful look in his eyes. "The important thing, boys, is this event gives you a chance to learn new things and make new friends." He tugged on Willy's shirt collar. "If you had won, wouldn't you have wanted the other children to help you celebrate rather than pout and act like you just punched them in the nose?"

Willy grinned. Then Tyler snickered. "Come on," Willy said, nudging Tyler's shoulder. "Let's go see their boat and figure out how they got her looking so good." Off they went in a thunder of running feet.

Leo stood and blew out a breath—and Grace wanted to throw her arms around his neck and hug him. "You are amazing, Captain Sullivan."

He winked. "Wait until you see me throw an axe. It's much easier than trying to be a guiding hand to a young boy."

But she didn't want to see him throw an axe right now. She

wanted to pull him from the crush of the crowd to a private place where she could ask him the question burning in her heart. But it wasn't the time for such a question, so she strolled toward the crowd instead of away from it, her arm linked with his, her focus on enjoying their time together before the axe throw.

A huge, tented area shaded the many bingo competitors already at play, while nearby a barbecue pit sizzled and spit, sending curls of smoke into the air as a variety of meats cooked. Opposite from that, the Crowe's Nest offered sassafras root beer and regular beer, while just a few areas down and across the way a children's wood chip treasure hunt was in full swing.

Leo explained to her that wooden toys would be hidden beneath the mound of wood shavings throughout the day. Several little boys dropped to their knees to dig through the pile while a few girls used small brooms to brush away the wood chips. Whatever toy they found beneath the chips was theirs to keep.

Beyond all those things lay a long stretch of woodsman competitions. There were sawing challenges, greased pole climbs, chopping competitions, and the ever-popular axe throw. When they arrived at the competition area, Rebecca was standing in the crowd holding Finn while Adam joined the competitors for the pole climb.

Four poles stood thirty feet high and were placed four feet apart, each of them slathered with grease. Competitors, one of them Leo to Grace's surprise, moved to the base of a chosen pole waiting for the starting bell. Leo and Adam jested with one another about who would win.

Once the climb began, all four competitors latched onto a separate pole, wrapping their arms and legs around it, for it was too large a diameter for them to grip it with their hands. They each began shinnying the pole they had chosen to climb, inching their way upward. They all made respectable progress on their first three movements. But by that point they were covered in grease, which not only made it more difficult to hold on but also to keep from sliding back down the pole. They clamped their arms and legs

around the poles, their muscles flexing beneath taut shirts as each man gazed up at the red flag waving from the top of his pole. Each man would pause in his slippery climb to rest or to strategize how he might finish the climb. One robust, bearded man hiked his knees high and planted the soles of his boots on either side of the pole. He was able to move himself upward a couple of feet. But his next attempt with his now greasy bootheels sent him sliding down the pole looking like a frog. His bottom hit the ground and tumbled him backward bootheels over shoulders. He popped right up onto his feet and executed a dramatic bow. The crowd's initial gasp turned to hearty laughter.

As Grace stood in the crowd, she covered her mouth in an effort to contain her laughter. But it was a losing battle while watching Leo and Adam attempt the seemingly impossible feat of shinnying a greased pole. At one point, all three men who were still clinging to a pole seemed to be going nowhere. Every movement they made seemed to send them down instead of up, and the poles they were climbing appeared to get slipperier the higher they climbed. Leo was next to slide down the pole, and though his decent was less dramatic than the previous man's tumble, his slow spin around the pole was enhanced by his salute to the crowd.

By the time Adam made his descent and the other man followed him, neither having reached the top, Grace's sides hurt from laughing. Wiping her eyes, she turned to Rebecca. "I have never seen such a silly event in my life."

"The men love it," Rebecca said, laughing and shaking her head.

"I must confess I do too!" Grace said, still trying to catch her breath.

Leo and Adam joined them, both men covered in grease and laughing like misbehaving boys. "We're going to clean up and change our clothes. Shall we meet you ladies back here, and then we can head to the Buck-n-Chuck competition together?"

"We wouldn't miss it," Rebecca said, then turned back to Grace. "Brace yourself. There's another pole climb about to begin."

And so Grace watched the second round of competitors attempt the pole climb, and laughed until her sides hurt. The antics of the men were comical, and she found herself thoroughly enjoying the beautiful day with her friend. Willy and Tyler checked in briefly and shot off again to watch another competition. Leo and Adam arrived minutes later in clean clothes with freshly washed hands and faces.

"Well, you two look much improved," Grace said, feeling a ripple of excitement from Leo's dark-eyed gaze.

Together the four of them, and Finn who was now sleeping on his mother's shoulder, wandered to the next competition where Adam joined in.

Grace watched the sawyers partner up and ready themselves for the competition. "That's an interesting name," she said. "Why do they call it the Buck-n-Chuck?"

Rebecca wrinkled her nose. "Let's hope you don't find out."

Leo's chuckle made Grace feel as if she were being left out of an inside joke.

The start of the competition turned her attention back to the event. A two-man team, using what Leo described as a bucking saw, raced to cut through a twenty-inch diameter white pine log. The team with the quickest time won. But cutting through a log that thick was no easy feat. The sawyers' arms moved like rods on train wheels, shuttling back-and-forth, moving in a quick, precise rhythm as sweat dripped from their foreheads and their breath came in gasps. Saw blades flashed in the sunlight as the rasp of sharp metal teeth tore through wood. The sight and sounds of the competition riveted Grace and made her shoulders tense.

Down through the first six inches of the log, strong men wielded the saw with what seemed to be little effort. Halfway through and they bent to their task with determined faces. Two thirds of the way through and the men were panting hard, sweat flinging from their hair and staining the backs of their shirts. A couple of inches remaining, and the men were working hard, breathing hard,

struggling to shift the saw back and forth. Finally, one team severed the log completely, and then another team finished seconds behind, and another just half a minute after that. All men were now hunched over with hands on their knees, gasping, some gagging, and one poor boy… oh dear!

Grace clapped a hand over her mouth and averted her eyes. “Oh my, I understand the name now. A bucking saw to cut, and then comes the chuck part… oh my.”

Nodding, Rebecca wrinkled her nose again, but Leo just laughed. “That young man didn’t know to skip breakfast this morning. He just learned that to participate in the Buck-and-Chuck you should wait to eat until after the competition.”

“Unfortunately, that became apparent to more than just that young man,” Grace said, making Leo laugh again.

“Come on.” He offered his arm. “A walk will refresh you.”

“It sounds lovely, but aren’t you going to compete in the axe throw?”

“I am, but we have a few minutes yet.” With that they set off toward the river where they settled beside each other on the grassy bank. As the river flowed by it calmed Grace’s queasy stomach. But her upset hadn’t completely been caused by the young man’s unpleasant display. It was from the excitement of the day… and the thrill of the previous evening… and from wondering what Leo had meant by *falling for you* and *taking things too far*. His words were ambiguous and had set her mind into a dizzying round of questions that nagged her. But how was she to ask him to explain himself without putting him in an awkward position? If he confessed his love, well, it would settle most every question in her mind. But if he didn’t, or couldn’t, love her, what then?

“Are you unwell?” he asked.

She dredged up a smile. “I’m just listening to the river and the people and sound of Crane Landing. It’s not only a beautiful place but a happy one.”

“It’s a happier place for me now that you’re here,” he said,

gazing down at her.

“So you’re happy, yet you worry that you might take things too far,” she said struggling for a playful tone. “That’s quite a confession, Captain.”

“A confession I’ve never before been compelled to make,” he said, and yet Grace thought he seemed a bit preoccupied as he had since returning from his jaunt down the coast a couple days ago. Had something happened?

“You’ve never made such a confession then?” she asked, the question out of her mouth before she realized she’d asked it.

“Not once,” he said quietly.

“In that case, and I’m truly sorry to bring this up now, but I simply must know where our relationship is headed because I, well, it’s not just my heart involved in this. I need to look out for Willy.” She had to know what was in Leo’s heart, or at least what plans were in his head.

His smile faded and he studied her intently. “I would never intentionally hurt either of you. But, Grace, if you’re asking what I think you’re asking, I’m sorry but I can’t…” He released a hard sigh. “Promises and commitments are something I can’t make right now.”

Right now… What did that mean? That he might someday be able to commit himself to her and promise them a lifetime together? Or that he might never be able to do so? It wasn’t that she was asking for promises or commitments but rather clarity. She needed to know if their relationship was more than friendship and passion for him.

He slipped his hand around hers, giving her fingers a gentle squeeze. “You must know how much I care about you.”

But she didn’t know. “What I know is you’re a kind and generous friend.”

A shadow of hurt clouded his eyes, and her words seemed to offend him. “Is that how you see me? As a friend?”

“Yes,” she said, because they were friends, and because she didn’t know what they were beyond that—because he couldn’t or

wouldn't tell her how he felt about her.

"We're more than friends, Grace, and you know it."

If they'd been alone, he might have kissed her. The desire to do so was in his eyes. But that was attraction, and attraction didn't mean love.

"Do I need to skip the axe throw and take you back to the cove to show you how I feel?" he asked playfully.

As much as she would like that, she wasn't going anywhere with him. Because it was becoming too difficult to keep her response to him in check. One look from him, one touch, one single word would sweep her away like a leaf in the wind, lifting and spinning and carrying her straight into the dangerous warmth of his arms. This time she couldn't let him carry her away without her consent.

Because his commitments were elsewhere. He was going to London. She understood why he must go, but he wasn't asking her to wait for him, nor was he asking her to join him. She and Willy and Leo had sailed together before. Willy would soon be out of school for the summer, and Grace had left her fear of the water in the past, so there was no reason the three of them couldn't head to London together. But Leo wasn't asking. He wasn't suggesting he would wait until they could go together. He was leaving without any promise or commitment to her. So what was she to think? Every thought that streamed through her mind warned her to be careful.

"Grace, there's something I need to tell you. It might upset you, but it's something you should know."

The concerned look in his eyes worried her. What if he said last night was a mistake or that she'd misread his attraction as devotion? She didn't want to know… and yet she had to know, but not now… not while they were in such a crowded place. If he were going to shatter her hopes, then she wanted to suffer that blow in private.

"We should head back," she said, intentionally cutting him off. Her head was too full of worrisome thoughts to manage any more.

Whatever he had to tell her could wait until he returned from London. That would give her time to mull over her situation and decide what she must do to protect herself and Willy. Getting to her feet, she made a show of adjusting her skirt while she steadied herself. “You don’t want to miss the axe toss—”

“Throw,” he interjected, already standing beside her as if glad to be done with her pointed questions. His gaze swept the grounds as if he were looking for someone.

“Axe throw,” she continued, “because it seems to be the feature event of the day.”

“It is, but—”

“Then we should be off,” she said, cutting him short.

For a moment, he hesitated. Then with a sigh, he tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow and led her back to the congested grounds.

Together, they walked past the bingo area and a children’s puppet show, and then slowed their pace as they returned to the large spread of grass where the lumberjack sports were being held, the axe throw among them.

They slipped into an opening in the crowd of spectators where she saw Willy and Tyler lounging in the grass a few yards from the competition area. Willy gave her a wave to let her know he knew where to find her when the event was finished. He was safe enough where he was, so she decided it was a good vantage point for him to watch Leo compete.

As the announcer gave a shout for contestants of the axe-throwing contest to form a line near him, Leo gave her elbow a gentle squeeze and then joined the other competitors.

Grace spied Adam and Rebecca heading her way, a babbling Finn perched atop his father’s shoulders, the boy’s chubby fists full of his daddy’s hair. The sight of the happy family buoyed her spirits and wrung her heart. She wanted a family of her own. She knew it as surely as she knew she loved Leo.

As they approached, Adam said to his wife, “Finn and I are

going to walk around a bit while you ladies visit." With that, he wandered off at a leisurely pace with his son bouncing on his shoulders.

It was easy to see why Rebecca was so enamored of her husband; goodness and strength radiated from him.

When Mary joined them a few minutes later, Rebecca asked, "Where is your sash?"

Mary stuck out her tongue, making Rebecca laugh. At Grace's obvious confusion, Mary sighed dramatically and said, "The event organizers used to insist I wear a sash proclaiming me a direct descendent of our founder. It was very red and big as an anaconda."

"Oh my," Grace exclaimed with a half laugh. "That must have been dreadful."

"It was indeed. Thankfully, after I married, I refused to continue the tradition."

"I sympathize completely," Grace said, "but to have, and to know, such family history is a marvel."

"It is." Mary clasped her hands in front of her. "If you enjoy family history, you and Rebecca must come to my parents' house for tea. We have several items dating back to the first days of Crane Landing. I would love to share them with you."

"I'd like that very much," Grace said sincerely. Though Mary probably didn't have anyone in her family like Grace's grandfather who had lied and manipulated her, the beautiful young woman had grown up in a wealthy family with burdensome restrictions and obligations. Although Mary undoubtedly enjoyed the finer things in life, she'd clearly found a way to fit in and become a regular member of the community. No wonder she hadn't wanted to wear a red sash to distance herself from others.

In a way, Grace had worn a monstrous red sash all her youth thanks to her grandfather. He'd marked her as unattainable and above the common folk as he'd called those outside his circle, keeping her far from anyone he thought "too pedestrian." Worst of all, he'd kept her from her father.

The scent of fresh-cut spruce tinged the air, and the soft roar of the ocean in the distance reminded Grace that she was in Crane Landing, enjoying a new life with new friends and with her little brother… and maybe… possibly with Leo who was about to compete.

Apprehension and excitement brewed in Grace. She had never attended anything like this, which was both exhilarating… and humbling. She grasped just how sheltered her upbringing had been. She'd grown up insulated from gatherings like this, with people who earned their living off the land and upon the sea with great brawn, daring, and ingenuity. That's what these lumberjack competitions were celebrating today, she realized. They represented hard work and hope, and while it might be a trophy or a blue ribbon that measured success for today, the real prize was in the friendships forged and the bonds solidified through a lifetime of working together.

"Look," Rebecca said enthusiastically, "Leo is getting ready to compete."

Grace had already spied him, her entire being drawn toward the man—even when he couldn't make promises or commitments. After signing in for the competition, he unhooked his axe from its loop on his belt and undid the leather tie along his muscled right thigh. Next, he carefully unsheathed the sharp blade from its leather casing. All the while, he moved in tandem with the referee's directions, settling into place within the group of competitors.

Leo looked toward the three of them… but his gaze lingered on Grace as a smile lifted one corner of his mouth.

Tiny butterflies unfurled their wings and beat inside her chest.

He gave a small toss of his axe, rotating it twice in the air before catching the handle in his hand. A second later, the announcer called for the first match to begin, drawing his attention back to the competition.

Rebecca nudged Mary. "Looks like you missed your chance with Leo, my friend."

“It took exactly one kiss for both of us to know we were meant to be friends” Mary said. “I think his heart has landed in the right hands.”

Grace pondered that. How could any woman not swoon in Leo’s arms? Because she did. Every time. But she was far from certain she held his heart in her hands.

“I think it’s safe to say Leo will win this competition just to impress you,” Rebecca said.

“He has already impressed me,” Grace replied. “He saved me from drowning in an icy river… and then he saved me again when I was drowning in grief, after my father died.”

Mary’s expression grew sympathetic. “I’m glad he’s been there for you. He’s a good man you can depend on.”

Could she? That’s all she’d wanted to know—but it was the one thing Leo couldn’t promise.

The competition was underway, so they turned their attention to the event of the day. She was beginning to realize that this day wasn’t about winning competitions but about all the moments and the many memories being made in between. These moments between friends that Grace was now a part of would be the first in a long line of minutes, hours, and days that she hoped to enjoy in Crane Landing, hopefully with Leo. Either way, this wasn’t only Founders Day for the town but for her, too, as she mentally planted her flag and proclaimed this beautiful oceanside town her home.

As Leo stepped forward to take his turn, he knocked axe heads with his competition in a good luck gesture. Then he stepped to the throw line, looking strong and confident. His tall, athletic body radiated strength as he took his stance, one foot forward, his eyes focused on the target. An instant later, he stepped ahead with his other foot, brought the axe up over his head and released it in a powerful one-handed throw. The axe rotated once as it hurled through the air… and then *thunk*. The blade gouged dead center into the log round.

The crowd erupted with hoots and hollers. Leo had been the first

competitor to hit center target on a first throw. His next hit just left of center. Still a good throw from the sound of the cheering crowd, but it left him tied with two other competitors. Blades glinting in the sun, sweat beading their brows, each man settled into his stance, eyed the target, and took his throw. To everyone's surprise, the round ended in a three-way tie as well.

Fully engaged now, the crowd cheered for their favorites as each man lined up again. That round eliminated one of the men and left Leo to compete with a big brute of a man.

The intensity of the contest rippled through the crowd, raising the noise of their cheers between throws but leaving them completely silent during each throw. Grace's heartbeat doubled and she held her breath, gasping as the brute's axe blade hit center target. Every throw by the two men became a back and forth duel between them… and a flirting game for Leo who openly sought out Grace between each throw.

Thunk! Leo's blade hit just left of center.

Thunk! Brute's blade cleaved a deep gouge dead center, causing an uproar in the crowd. Grace scanned the faces of the onlookers, wondering if their deafening uproar was a cheer or a complaint. It seemed to be both depending on which man was throwing, and also an overall cheer for the exciting competition.

Leo seemed to be the crowd favorite—until he winked at Grace and then missed the target completely.

A simultaneous gasp burst from the crowd, and it seemed that all eyes turned accusingly on her. Rebecca burst out laughing, and Mary followed suit, but Grace stood dumbstruck with her face burning. Was she a distraction to him?

Unable to bear the tension or his outrageous flirting or the crowd's scrutiny, she ducked behind Rebecca, and drifted back until she was swallowed by the crowd. When she was certain Leo could no longer see her, she positioned herself so she could still see him, barely. But it was enough to see him frown when he couldn't find her in the crowd. He seemed almost panicked by her absence. But

why?

Leo's competitor gave him a nudge, forcing his attention back to the competition, but it seemed the pleasure had fizzled for him. He executed his throws with precision but without flair. When it came down to the last throw, which he had to hit perfectly to continue the competition, Grace clenched her fingers and held her breath. Leo's blade soared through the air and struck hard… center right. His competitor's blade hit dead center, winning him the competition. Grace expected to see disappointment in Leo's eyes, but they were lit with admiration for his opponent, and his expression seemed to indicate relief that the competition was over.

Grace made her way back to Rebecca and Mary, giving Leo a small wave that seemed to bring him immense relief. Willy leapt to his feet and raced to Leo's side, the two of them sharing a hug and a moment of conversation that had Willy nodding as if he understood every word, before he scooted away with Tyler.

Then Leo cut a path through the crowd, caught her hand, and escorted her to the shade of a maple tree just beyond the gravel walk of the midway. She had expected him to head for the barbecue pit and then the river. Sunset and the lighting of the torches alongside the water were just moments away.

"I thought you'd be eager to claim a spot for eating and watching the fireworks," she said, feeling distant from him for the first time. "We should find Willy before he gets lost in the crowd."

"He and Tyler are going to meet us at the barbecue pit in a few minutes." Leo slipped his hands around hers. "I want a moment alone with you before we head back into the crush."

"I think we're far from being alone," she said, gesturing to the crowd of people milling about just a few yards away. "You do realize, don't you, that you've made a fan of every young boy who watched you compete today. Willy was beside himself while watching you. He's going to miss you when you're gone to London."

"And I'll miss him."

Grace waited for him to say he would miss her, too, but he

didn’t say a word. He just gazed into her eyes and seemed lost in his thoughts.

Worry wormed its way through her, twisting in her gut and shaking her confidence. Was this thing between them just a spring romance for him? She had to know, not just for herself but for Willy too. He was giving his heart to Leo as well, and Grace couldn’t bear the thought of Willy suffering another heartbreak if or when Leo walked away.

She opened her mouth to try to explain that their relationship, and the ultimate celebration or devastation that could result from their connection, wasn’t just about them. Willy was involved and they both needed to tread carefully. But just over Leo’s shoulder she saw a sight that stopped her heart.

Devon Kettering was moving directly toward them.

And so was her grandfather.

Chapter Thirty-Two



As Grace stood on trembling legs, she watched her lifelong friend and former fiancé stride across the grounds toward her. Her grandfather's look, which she had expected to be repentant over his betrayal, seemed to be one of relief. He looked older and was using a cane for the first time in her memory. Her flare of concern was quickly squashed by the weight of her anger.

Before she could explain her situation to Leo or tell him to disappear in the crowd, Devon and her grandfather were upon them.

Her grandfather wore a pinched expression as if he were in pain or perhaps fighting hard not to pull her into his arms. Wealth and position were apparent in everything about the men, from the exquisite cut of their clothing to the authority in their straight-backed stances.

Seeing her grandfather, whom she had loved so deeply, stand before her as if he'd done nothing wrong, as if he hadn't stolen the most precious part of her life, infuriated her. "Why are you here?" she asked, her voice quaking with anger and heartache.

"Grace, we need to talk." His eyes darted to either side, suggesting he was grossly uncomfortable having this discussion in public, but she didn't care a whit about his discomfort. "There are things you don't know, dear. Come home so we can talk this through properly and without an audience."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

The starch seemed to leave his shoulders, and that's when Devon stepped in. "Grace, what is going on?" he asked quietly, the kindness in his voice reminding her of their many heartfelt talks. "Why are you here?" Apparently, he still didn't know of her grandfather's hideous deed. She hadn't shared that in her letter to Devon, and it was obvious that her grandfather hadn't enlightened him either.

"My father is alive—was alive," she corrected. "My grandfather has been lying about my father's death all these years. That's why I didn't return to Fairview."

Surprise and confusion crossed Devon's face. His gaze shot between Grace and her grandfather before he blew out a breath. "This sounds complicated and like a conversation that should take place elsewhere."

It seemed her entire life was complicated.

"How did you find me?" She speared her grandfather with a pointed look. "I suppose your Pinkerton men tracked me down?"

Her grandfather's white eyebrows raised as if he were surprised she didn't know how he'd come to be there. "You can thank Mr. Sullivan for sharing your whereabouts."

It felt as if someone punched her in the abdomen. Pressing her hand to her midriff, she looked at Leo, willing him to dispute the lie. But there was no denial in his eyes, no apology, just a self-congratulatory gleam as if he'd just given her a precious gift.

"You…?"

"This is what I wanted to tell you," he said.

"How could you do this to me?" Her question came out as a whisper because she was literally breathless. Leo was the one person she'd trusted, the last person she would have expected to betray her. But he had. Her thoughts spun sideways and she wondered if their relationship had just been a diversion, a dalliance for him. Is that what he'd wanted to tell her? That it was time for her to go home because he was moving on? Is that why he couldn't or wouldn't make promises. Had last night been his last passionate

dance with her, his way of saying goodbye? Is that the real reason he was going to London? Nothing made sense.

Leo stood before her, tall and strong and without a shred of regret in his eyes. “I know you’re angry, Grace, but—”

“Angry doesn’t begin to express how I’m feeling,” she said cutting him off. Biting her lip to stop a sob, she swung her gaze to the milling crowd funneling their way toward the shore. Stragglers and small groups of people remained in the area but seemed not to notice that her world was shattering. How could he have done this to her?

“Grace, you need your family,” Leo said with a certainty she didn’t share. “You need to talk with your grandfather and sort this out.”

“How dare you assume to know what I need! This is for me to decide.”

In her heart she knew she’d have contacted her grandfather eventually, when she wasn’t so angry with him, when she could talk with him without spewing hateful words and ruining any chance of them moving past his betrayal. But she was a long way from that place of reason and understanding. She’d needed time—time that Leo had just stolen from her. He’d done the very thing her grandfather had done when he’d stolen precious years she could have had with her father.

“You’re not seeing this properly,” Leo said, reaching for her hand.

She jerked away. “Don’t you dare touch me after what you’ve done. You intervened in my life as if it were your own to control, but it’s not. You made it perfectly clear this was a relationship without commitment. And yet you brazenly usurped my right to make my own decisions.” She’d believed he’d respected her and supported her choice to be in Crane Landing, but apparently not. “Why would you do this?”

He seemed affronted by her question. “Because family is important and I don’t want you to lose the people you love.”

“My family is not your concern. Neither is my heart.” With that she turned away, unable to view his handsome face without wanting to slap it. The man was too highhanded and assuming. He’d sashayed into her life and turned it inside out. He’d abducted her, caused her to relive her father’s death, and now he was forcing her into a situation she wasn’t ready to face. If he’d really cared for her, he would have respected her enough to let her manage a situation that was almost too painful to bear in her own time and in her own way. He would have stood by her, even if only in friendship.

Instead he’d betrayed her trust and broken her heart.

Sick to her soul, and still too angry with her grandfather to reach out to him, she turned her gaze to her lifelong friend. “Devon, would you please take me home?” she asked, desperate to go somewhere private before she shattered into a million pieces.

At his nod, she slipped her hand into the crook of his arm, intending to find Willy and leave as quickly as possible. But Leo reached out and clasped her other forearm, tugging her away from Devon. The feel of his hand, so warm and familiar and so much a part of her day, wrung her heart.

“Grace, wait.” His face, when she looked at him, was a mask of confusion. “I’ll take you home. You know that. Let’s get Willy and we’ll head back now.”

She released a half-sob. “And then what? You’ll help me pack? You’ll deliver my trunks to the train station? No thank you, Captain. I can manage leaving on my own.”

“Leaving? What are you talking about? What is happening?” He looked so bewildered she almost felt sorry for him.

“I’m going back to Fairview.”

“Why? Your grandfather is welcome at the cottage for however long he chooses to visit.” Leo gestured toward Devon. “I don’t know who this chap is, but he’s welcome there too.”

“I’m her fiancé,” Devon said, tucking Grace’s hand back into the crook of his elbow as if prepared to shield her from Leo’s pursuit.

Shock flared in Leo's eyes and his chin jerked up as if he'd been punched in the face. His gaze shot between Devon and Grace twice before it settled on her. "Is this true?"

The fact that Devon still considered them engaged despite her letter freeing him from that obligation reaffirmed Grace's decision to leave. She had to go before she invested any more of her heart in a man who couldn't commit. Devon was the only man who'd never betrayed her. Not once. He'd been a steadfast friend from childhood, and she knew she could count on him to help her navigate her future wherever it might lead. It had become painfully obviously that Leo wouldn't be that man. He didn't want to be that man. And she couldn't imagine trying to live in this beautiful town without him.

Still, she didn't answer because she wasn't ready to voice a commitment she might not be able to make. Leo could think what he wanted. Devon would give her time to make her own decision.

If her concern were only for herself she'd buy a small cottage by the ocean and live a thrifty, independent life in some pretty little town away from here. But she had Willy and his future to consider. The money from the sale of their island home wouldn't be enough to provide for them more than two or three years. Devon could and would see not only to her future but to Willy's. And although he couldn't take the place of Leo in Willy's heart, or in hers, Grace knew Devon would be a fair, kind, and generous guardian to Willy should she marry him.

That's all she needed to know. Devon wouldn't betray her.

Leo already had.

The eyes she come to love, so dark now she couldn't see any light in them, drilled into her. "All this time you've been engaged?" Leo's fists clenched at his sides. "You didn't think I should know this?"

She should have told him. But she'd considered her engagement broken. "It's a moot point now because I'm returning to Fairview. Willy and I will be gone as soon as I can pack our belongings."

Leo's gaze swept toward the mountains then back toward the ocean. "This is your home, Grace. This is Willy's home. You both belong here."

"Not anymore." Until a few minutes ago, she'd thought so too. But Leo had left her little choice and had given her no reason to stay. It had only been home because of him. But he'd manipulated her. He'd taken it upon himself to decide her future. And he'd made his position clear about not committing to a relationship between them. In the end it didn't matter because without a commitment she had to make other choices. And in truth, even if Leo had dropped to one knee and proposed to her right there, she didn't think she could ever trust him again.

Still, to uproot Willy from the one place he was happy shattered her heart so completely she knew she would never forgive Leo for his part in all of this.

The only way to prove she was serious about leaving, that whatever she'd had with Leo was broken beyond repair, stood beside her, all six feet of wealth and power in a three-piece suit, and so she turned, placed her palms on the chest of her lifelong friend and kissed him on the lips.

A groan came from both men, one of surprised pleasure, another of agony and outrage.

With that, she looked into the eyes of the man she loved and could never forgive. "Goodbye, Captain."

Chapter Thirty-Three



By the time they boarded their connection bound for Philadelphia, Grace feared she might begin screaming and never stop. Hurt and anger burned outward from her heart, hot as the coals that fueled the train southward. And every screech of the steam whistle matched the silent cries of injustice inside her head.

All too soon the town she'd come to love and the cottage she'd called home were miles behind and states away. She couldn't bring herself to think of Leo, of what he'd done, or what he must be feeling. But she could see how Willy was taking their separation. His eyes were filled with misery and heartache and questions she couldn't answer. In tears, he'd asked why they were leaving their home. He was deeply confused and angry, and she couldn't blame him. They'd been happy in Crane Landing. She and Willy had been building a new life there in the little oceanside cottage. Now she was hauling him a world away. She'd tried to explain that she had to look out for both of them now, but he sat dejected and heartbroken, his jaw clamped in angry silence. She could see how deep a cut her abrupt departure had cleaved in each of them.

To her relief, Devon was especially considerate of Willy. He saw to the stowing of their baggage, what little they'd brought with them. He asked after their comfort along every leg of their journey, asking whether they favored window or aisle seats, wanted the window opened or closed, and if he could fetch something from the dining car. Although she and Willy both declined, Devon had taken

it upon himself to bring Willy a sandwich that her little brother ate with halfhearted interest.

In contrast, her grandfather's demeanor throughout the return trip was one of a wealthy railroad owner simply returning from a summer's excursion in Maine with his granddaughter and her intended… and her little brother in tow.

Her grandfather was a skilled conversationalist and never lacked for a topic to talk about or an audience to listen to him with rapt attention. He'd once said, "Grace, my dear, traveling by rail is a golden opportunity for people of all ranks in life to converse." But the only people in their car were their wealthy peers. It was vexing to hear him prattle on as if nothing were amiss, but she suspected it was his way of avoiding a discussion with her. She had no intention of having that talk in a public place. Still, meals in the dinner car with him were excruciating. She ate even though she wasn't hungry, and she talked to strangers whom she would never see again but who were clearly charmed by her grandfather and his many stories. If only they knew about the horrible thing he'd done.

Just a few hours from their final stop in Philadelphia, her grandfather announced that he was heading for the smoking-car. It was but another advantage of being an owner of a railroad. The average traveler didn't have the luxury of moving from one seat to another between the cars.

Needing a moment in the ladies dressing-room, Grace sought to escape her grandfather. But he rose at the same time she did and preceded her through the car.

"I'm glad to see you are being reasonable about this situation, my dear," he said over his shoulder. "I thought perhaps you might refuse to come home." He paused for a moment and then said, "I'm relieved you came to your senses and realized that marrying Devon is the best course of action for your future, and Willy's of course."

"My future is no longer your concern, Granddaddy," she said, her voice even and smooth. An elderly woman, just leaving the dressing-room, came down the aisle toward them. Grace dredged up

a smile and paused a moment to allow the woman room to pass. Once she and her grandfather were moving again, she added, “And do not *ever* assume to know my mind.”

With that, she stepped ahead of him, coolly leaving him in her wake.

She was spared the shadow of his company for the remainder of the train ride.

Given her grandfather’s absence, Devon seemed to relax into his more natural way of speaking with her. But when word passed through the car that their stop was just ahead, she could hear him breathe a sigh of relief. She was relieved too. She just wanted to get Willy settled, and then confront her grandfather.

But as she glanced at Devon, she knew he was suffering as deeply as she was. She’d hurt him. Although unintentional, her actions had wounded him. She wanted to explain and to apologize, but with Willy sleeping in his seat beside her it was a conversation that would have to wait until they were alone.

Devon met and held her gaze. “I think this is the longest period of time that the two of us have been in each other’s company and not talked. I have to admit, I don’t like it.”

“We’ve talked,” she said, but knew their shallow conversation wasn’t what he was referring to.

His brows flattened. “We need to talk about us. About that Maine gentleman you seemed so enamored of.”

Am enamored of, she thought. Always. Forever. Even though he’d broken her trust… and her heart.

“He’s the captain of the ship that took me to my father.”

“In Maine?” Devon asked.

“No. To an island off the coast of South Carolina. It’s a long story. We’ll be at our stop soon.”

“I’m not going anywhere until then. You could, in fact, consider me a captive audience.”

She smiled at his attempt at humor, but then the smile dissolved as she thought of her grandfather’s lies. “Suffice it to say my father

didn't die years ago as my grandfather led me to believe. Instead, he passed only weeks ago. I—I went to Maine because… because Willy grew up there in a cottage that our father owned. The one we stopped at to gather our things before leaving."

He nodded.

Before departing Crane Landing, she'd insisted Granddaddy take her there and wait outside while she and Willy packed a portmanteau. She'd taken only her clothing and toiletries and the lap quilt she'd taken from her father's island home. Willy had taken their beloved kaleidoscope and his book of stories. She'd left behind the signed contract agreeing to sell their island home to Ashe—and a note for Leo.

"Would you have ever come home if we hadn't traveled up there to get you?" Devon asked quietly, interrupting her drifting thoughts.

"I no longer consider my grandfather's house my home. His cruel deceit denied me years with my father."

"I don't fault you for how you feel, Grace. But I hope you will consider our house your home."

"Devon… you can't still want to marry me."

"I do," he gently cut in, "and I'll not allow my mother to dictate how big or how grand our wedding will be, which should alleviate some of the pressure you felt. I'll inform your grandfather, too, that we intend to make it our own affair."

Unable to meet his eyes, she glanced out the window, watching as they passed by the familiar farmlands of Pennsylvania.

"Grace," he said, gently prodding her. "We've known each other a long time. Before we were anything else, we were friends. I am now and will forever be your friend. No matter what. So please tell me what you want."

Knowing she couldn't live in her grandfather's house after what he'd done, she simply said she wanted them, and Willy, to be happy.

"Then we'll marry as planned and get on with creating a happy

life for all of us." With that, he settled back in his seat and left her to her thoughts.

For Devon, their mutual happiness meant marriage.

But she no longer knew what it meant for her.

She turned her face to the window again, but instead of rolling fields and meandering streams, she saw a cottage on the beach and a man she'd never wanted to leave—a man who'd made it impossible to stay.

LEO WOKE WITH A START, half lunging out of his bed at the cottage —the bed he'd hoped to one day share with Grace. But he was alone. He sat on the edge of the mattress and buried his face in his hands. He'd stayed at the cottage hoping Grace would return.

But she was gone. She'd left with her wealthy groom-to-be whom she *loved*.

And she'd taken Willy.

Shaking with fatigue, Leo released a weary groan. How could he have let this happen? He'd just stood there stricken with disbelief, gutted by Grace's assertion that she loved Devon Kettering. And that might be the truth because she'd been engaged to Kettering before Leo had so callously plucked her from that world.

Still… she'd seemed happy in Crane Landing, and Leo had believed she'd cared for him. Had that been real? Or had Grace just tried to make the best of a situation she'd been thrust into because she was angry and hurt over her grandfather's betrayal? She'd been kidnapped, reunited with a father she'd thought dead, introduced to a brother she hadn't known about but was responsible for, forced to relive her father's death, only to discover she'd been betrayed by her grandfather. Any confusion she'd had about her feelings for her fiancé or for Leo was understandable.

But the moments Leo had shared with her had felt real. The warmth and passion in her eyes when she'd looked at him couldn't

have been a lie. She'd been right there with him in those moments. He'd felt it. He'd lived it.

And yet she'd gone. She'd chosen Devon Kettering and her previous life.

Had she chosen that path because she'd been so angry with Leo for contacting her grandfather? He'd done that for her. He'd wanted to explain how crippling it was to carry the burden of destroying your own family. Grace would carry that same burden if she neglected to talk with her grandfather and try to heal the wound. He wasn't a young man. Time, as Leo had learned, moved fast, and opportunities slipped away. He hadn't wanted Grace to miss that chance with her grandfather. He didn't want her to carry that weight on her shoulders every day of her life.

Knowing the bone-deep pain of losing his family, Leo had just wanted to help Grace save her own family. He hadn't seen it as a betrayal. But she had.

Sick at heart and bone-weary, he dragged himself out of bed, cleaned himself up, and headed to work at the shipyard.

Rebecca and Adam insisted he come for supper, but the night with his friends was bittersweet. It was a sharp reminder of the home and family and love he'd hoped to one day share with Grace and Willy.

He should have married her, or at least tried to do so.

He'd been so focused on living up to his promise to find his siblings, to make sure they were in good health and had food for their bellies and warm beds to sleep in, that he'd been unable to assure Grace and Willy that they could count on him.

Around and around went his thoughts, hour after hour, until by the time dawn approached, he felt caged and half-wild with heartache. How could she have not told him about Kettering? How could she have let him invest so much of his heart when she'd already promised herself to another man?

As he paced the cottage, he could see Grace and Willy everywhere. Grace had planted the red geraniums growing in the

window-boxes and rearranged the furniture to make the sitting room cozy. Her touch and her light lemony-floral scent lingered in every room, in every moment, in every memory. And seeing Robbie exploring the shore alone in the shadowy dawn, without Willy at his side, it tore another hole in Leo's chest.

It was a relief to finally be leaving for London with Ashe. Leo had to stop wallowing in his grief and get on with finding his brother. But in the early morning light, each step he took away from the cottage he'd shared with a woman he loved and a boy he adored speared him with pain. Realizing he'd accidentally left the letter he'd written to Willy lying on the table added another knife in his heart.

Gulping deep ragged breaths, Leo tried to ease the constriction in his chest and calm his mind as he adjusted his heavy rucksack over one shoulder and approached Ashe's ship. The *Silver Flame* sat at anchor in the bay where several of Ashe's crew were working at the dock moving barrels and boxes of goods ready for transport. As Leo had expected, his brother was at the dock overseeing the preparations for their trip to London.

"What can I do to help?" he asked, meeting Ashe on the dock.

"Nothing. Our girl is nearly loaded and ready to go. We'll leave port within the hour."

Chapter Thirty-Four



Returning to Fairview after so much time away was bittersweet for Grace. The only happiness she'd found in her homecoming was seeing Saul again, though her ribs were a bit tender from his exuberant hug. He had yet to leave her side and she wondered if her grandfather had ordered Saul to stay close to her. In truth, she was happy to have him near. She introduced Saul to Willy and told him they were all family now, that Willy was his little brother, and he would have to look out for him the same way he always looked out for her.

At night, alone in her bed, worries and thoughts looped endlessly, leaving her restless and awake. She could not just step back into her life here when she didn't even know what that life was going to be. In Crane Landing she'd at least had a vision of what she wanted, though she'd naively assumed Leo would be in their lives, fully engaged with them. Now, she and Willy were attempting to navigate each day without him. And it hurt. Watching a sunrise or a sunset, hearing the river flow past the boundaries of her grandfather's land, the water calling to both her and Willy—all of it was like a fresh wound in their hearts.

She had confronted her grandfather as soon as they had reached Fairview and she'd gotten Willy settled. But her grandfather had stood fast in his belief that he'd been justified in what he'd done because he'd done it out of love for Grace. No matter how she'd tried to make him see how wrong he was and how deeply he'd

wounded her, he'd argued that his actions had been necessary to keep her safe. He'd asked her to believe him, to trust that everything he'd done was for her benefit because he loved her.

Too wounded and exhausted to pursue such a volatile discussion, Grace clamped her mouth shut and turned her attention to helping Willy embrace his new home. She and Saul showed Willy the grounds and took him to the river to fish and for horseback rides along the wooded trails that crossed their expansive property. Keeping Willy busy and entertained was the kindest thing she could do for her little brother who was longing for Crane Landing and Leo and the life they'd left behind.

This evening the house was filled with guests whom she hadn't invited but was expected to entertain. It was out of respect for Devon that she pasted on a smile and played hostess as she had done so efficiently and so eloquently before she'd been swept away by Captain Sullivan.

The dinner party at Fairview that had just begun was her first reunion with her friend Sarah, and the two girls they had frequently shopped with or attended theater events with—none of whom she'd had a chance to say goodbye to all those months ago—and a number of her grandfather's business associates and their wives. But even amid a room filled with guests and lively conversation, silence settled around her soul. Though she saw to the comfort of each guest and engaged in conversation, nothing that happened in her grandfather's elegant dining room that evening permeated the miasma of grief that had clamped hard about her heart the moment she left Crane Landing.

This was a "welcome home" dinner, of all things, planned with great fanfare by her grandfather and Victoria Kettering. Grandfather explained away her unexpected absence—and her subsequent return with a younger half-brother—by saying they had discovered her father was alive and Grace had needed to spend time with him during his final days. Only Devon knew the truth.

To the public at large, Grace had become a sensation. Thanks to

her grandfather's maneuvering, the local columnist who covered Philadelphia's social sphere created a frenzy of interest with her story of how a "young heiress's father lost at sea and believed dead reappeared more than a decade later."

Not only did Grace have to swallow her grandfather's machinations but she had to pretend he'd made it possible for her to visit with her dying father and that he was welcoming her young brother into his home.

No one would ever know the colossal lie told to her about her father all those years ago. No one would know that Thomas Covington had gone to prison because of her grandfather's anger. And none would ever learn the true details of how she'd been taken one snowy night in April by a handsome captain named Leo Sullivan… and had ultimately fallen in love with him. The reality of her love for him was as lost as the lies that had torn her father from her life. And now she was here because Leo had betrayed her trust.

Why couldn't he have left her to deal with her family business in her own time? Had he thought so little of her ability to navigate her way through the mess her grandfather and her father had made that he'd needed to take it upon himself to intercede? In her heart she did believe Leo had meant well. But his high-handed interference and lack of confidence in her intelligence and backbone was something she couldn't overlook… or forgive.

Like whispered words she couldn't quite discern, she strained hard to understand how he could have had so little faith in her.

Her grandfather's interference had been a different matter because she'd been just a girl of ten when he'd stepped in to protect her. Whether his actions had been wrong or right, overly harsh or justified, they'd been motivated by his desire to protect her. What he'd done was on his conscience and was for him to deal with.

Even now, as she watched him socialize with his guests, she knew he loved her and had done his best to give her a life of luxury and his loving protection. Unfortunately, in robbing her of her father he'd stripped her of anything that mattered.

As if her grandfather felt her assessing gaze, he came to her side. “Thank you for being so delightful this evening, Grace. I’m extremely proud of you.”

She lifted her gaze to his, struggling to unearth a smile from beneath the weight of her aching heart. She managed a wobbly half-smile, not for him, because she was still too angry and wounded by his actions, but for Devon who was staunchly standing by her despite the knowledge she’d been in a compromising situation for months, had even begun a romantic relationship with another man. Devon wasn’t a weak man or someone who would tolerate being walked on. He was simply the kind of friend, the kind of *man*, who would stand at her side and defend her honor no matter what.

“I shall play my part in this charade, Grandfather, but know I’m doing so for Devon’s sake.” Excusing herself, she moved on to mingle. Now and then, she felt Devon and her grandfather watching her throughout the evening as she talked with each of their guests. They were people she cared about and was glad to see again… but they were people with whom she no longer felt a shared bond. How was she to live among them when this world now felt so alien to her.

IT WAS WELL after midnight when the last of their visitors departed. As Grace headed to her own bedchamber, she stopped by Willy’s room to check on him, quietly easing the door open to peer inside. At first, she thought he was awake for he’d opened the drapes of the room and had put up the window. He sat on the floor atop a tangled bed sheet, his feet tucked to one side of his body and his right arm on the windowsill, his head nestled in the crook of that arm.

As she moved closer, though, she realized he’d fallen asleep there.

She knelt at his side, her heart filled with love for her little brother. His brows were drawn down and his cheeks were wet. Whatever he dreamt of now or had fallen asleep thinking about had saddened and upset him—and it broke her heart.

The sailor's cap that he'd worn during the boat parade in Crane Landing lay atop the sheet he'd dragged to the floor with him. Had he planned to knot the sheet together and crawl out the window? And was his cap the one precious thing he thought to take with him? Was he so unhappy at Fairview that he wanted to run away?

She knew the answer because she felt the same. Her longing for Crane Landing and Leo was a weight on her heart that left her gasping for each breath.

She pressed one hand to her chest, aching to think Willy was suffering the same agony—and it was her fault. She shouldn't have acted so rashly and declared her love for Devon at the Founders Day celebration. But she'd been so hurt by Leo's conspiring with her grandfather behind her back that she'd lashed out at him and thrown her engagement and love for Devon in Leo's face. She'd used words as a weapon instead of explaining the situation to Leo. In the end she'd hurt not just Devon and Leo but also Willy who was just an innocent boy still suffering the loss of his father. Now she'd added another loss to his small shoulders and aching heart.

Flooded with shame, she looked out the window, dragging in a deep breath of cool air to steady herself. And that's when she saw it, the reason Willy had opened the window and curled up beside it with his sailor's cap: the moon-soaked tidal river in the distance. Even from here she could hear the flow of the Schuylkill River, its sound drifting inland on the night breeze.

She knew in an instant what Willy must have been seeing in his mind's eye and was thinking about as he sat here gazing out the window: Crane River and Crane Landing … Leo and the cottage… smelly Robbie and the sandy shore where they fished and played… and the joyful life he'd had there.

"Oh, Willy," she whispered, her eyes flooding.

How deep must his sorrow be, how intense his grief? He'd fallen asleep to the sounds of the ocean when he lived at Indigo Isle and at Crane Landing. Now she'd put him in a room with walls and floors so well made with hard Pennsylvania wood that he most likely could hear nothing more than his own breathing. No wonder he'd opened the window. The sound of the river probably called to him, just as it had called to their father.

Willy had even dressed in his old dungarees and his favored loose-fitting shirt, the clothing he most loved and always wore when he and Robbie had gone looking for crayfish along the shore. His bared dirty feet were tangled with the sheet, as if he'd itched to go running through soft sand and not be landlocked here at Fairview. She'd bought him clothing since their arrival: A handsome Norfolk jacket and matching knickerbockers that buckled below the knees, along with an Eton-collared shirt, and numerous other jackets and breeches, along with various footwear. She'd even taken him to the best barber in the city to have his hair cut, all those precious curls clipped off, so he now looked a perfect little lord of the manor—all of it done to make him fit in their new life. And Willy had tolerated it all while inside he must have been weeping, wanting his old clothes and his old life back.

Oh how she ached to give him back the life he treasured… and to reclaim that life for herself too. But she couldn't. Because everything between her and Leo had broken, and she didn't have enough money to raise Willy on her own. Leo had made it clear she couldn't count on him.

So her only recourse was to live with her grandfather or to marry Devon. She didn't want to choose either option, but for Willy's sake, she knew she must.

Devon deserved better than her half-hearted commitment, but she couldn't walk out on him again without bringing her world, and his, crashing down around them. And so she would do her best to create a life here that would help Willy heal and find happiness. How she would manage such a feat was beyond her at the moment.

“Whut’r’y’doing? Is sumethin’ wrong?” Willy’s little boy voice sounded even younger as he came slowly awake, trying to orient himself, his words bunched together and only half enunciated.

“I came to say goodnight,” she whispered, swallowing the clot of grief in her throat. “Let me help you back into bed.”

Getting groggily to his feet, he climbed into bed. He was clearly exhausted, so she remained silent while gently covering him with the blankets.

“How was your party?” he asked, snuggling down in.

She marveled that as tired and sad as he was, he would still ask about her. “Long. When you’re older, you can join us and see for yourself.” She moved to shut the window and pick the sheet up from the floor.

“How old?” he asked.

“When you’re thirteen or so, I suspect.”

His brow creased. “Saul’s older than that and he doesn’t have to join you.”

With the sheet now bundled in her arms, she turned back to him. “You’re right, sweetheart. He doesn’t have to, nor does he wish to do so.”

“I don’t think I wanna either,” he murmured, and then his gaze anchored on hers. “Do you think Leo forgot about us?”

Her heart cramped so hard it squeezed the breath from her lungs. Fighting tears, she shook her head. After a moment, she inhaled and said, “I think he’ll remember you every day of his life, Willy. He really loves you… and always will.”

“Then why hasn’t he written to me?”

It was a question she couldn’t answer, but she couldn’t let Willy think it was because Leo didn’t care. “Leo was going to London, remember? He can’t send a letter from the middle of the ocean.”

“That’s right,” he said, seeming satisfied by her answer. “I’m sure he’ll write me when he gets back.” With that, Willy turned on his side, tucked his pillow beneath his head, and drifted back to sleep.

Grace stood there for a few seconds longer, Willy's words echoing in her ears. His heart was back in Crane Landing with Leo and his friends and his memories of living there with their father. It was painfully clear that she was forcing Willy into a life he didn't want. But she didn't have a choice—and that meant Willy didn't have a choice either.

Chapter Thirty-Five



Bright July sunshine glinted off the rippling water of the Thames as Leo helped Ashe and his crew navigate *Silver Flame* the last few nautical miles to the London dockyard. This is where they would focus their efforts to track down Cal—and where Leo would hopefully, *finally*, be able to settle his past and move forward with his future.

It had been nearly two weeks since his life had fallen apart. Every fiber of his being had wanted to go after Grace and bring her back to Crane Landing regardless of the repercussions. But two things had held him back: the fact that she'd said she loved her fiancé, and the knowledge that Leo couldn't offer her any sort of future until he put his past to rest. So he'd come here with Ashe, the two of them determined to track down their younger brother whatever the cost.

Ashe's London contacts had discovered Cal's name on a police report because of a brawl that had taken place at a tavern a few weeks earlier. They hadn't been able to locate a home address for Cal but had learned the name of the tavern where the incident had occurred.

The Twin Horse Tavern was reputed to be a rough place with even rougher customers. Rumors of gaming and organized fights were said to be regular occasions there. The tavern sat on the fringes of the East End of London, an area of abject poverty. Soot and smoke hung heavy in the air, and horse dung and urine turned

the streets into a thick muck, the unpleasant combination turning Leo's stomach. "I'm not sure what I expected of the biggest city in the world, but it wasn't this," he said to Ashe.

"Don't judge London based on what you're seeing. The East End is the poorest part of an otherwise remarkable city."

Perhaps it was a remarkable place, but Leo found himself deeply disappointed in a city he'd once longed to see. How could they allow such poverty to exist here while so much wealth existed just a short carriage ride away? It was unjust and disgusting.

In the midst of the squalor, Leo longed for the fresh ocean breeze, blue sky, and pristine shore of Crane Landing—and for Grace. Always for Grace.

But she was really and truly gone… and she'd taken Willy and Leo's heart with her. All she'd left behind was the hair tie he'd lost and a note saying she'd found it in a pillowcase bundled up in her father's lap quilt that she'd scooped off the floor of his room the day they left Indigo Isle. It was only when she'd packed her things to leave Crane Landing that she'd discovered the hair tie tangled in the quilt.

Leo must have lost the tie while preparing her father's body for burial. The bittersweet moment of recovering his hair tie and part of his past while losing Grace and everything he'd wanted for his future still twisted his gut in a knot.

"We're here," Ashe said, cutting into Leo's thoughts. He gestured across the street to the Twin Horse Tavern.

The board and brick building sat on the corner of High Holburn Street and a side street that looked as if it led straight to perdition. Women of the night were out soliciting in broad daylight while bedraggled street urchins wandered the street trying to sell various goods from broken baskets. Some shoveled horse dung off the streets from passing carriages or slumped in doorways with nothing but hopeless expressions on their dirty faces. The sight made Leo groan aloud in despair. "This neglect by the city is criminal."

"I know," Ashe said. "I've had my company establish three

warming houses in the East End to help shelter and feed these folks. We've hired as many of them as we can to provide them with jobs. They help prepare and serve the meals and keep the facilities clean, but there's just so much poverty here…" Ashe frowned. "I'm working with several of my London associates to get more assistance for these folks, but it's going to take a long time and a massive effort to change things here."

Leo silently acknowledged the indisputable fact. From what he could see, the farther into the East End one went the more prevalent and severe the poverty. He couldn't even imagine the magnitude of what Ashe was trying to accomplish here. "Thank you for doing something about this," he said, deeply grateful that Ashe was using his wealth to help those in need. They both knew too well the pain of hunger and the despair that came from feeling abandoned. "I'll help any way I can," Leo said as they crossed the street to the Twin Horse Tavern. "Just tell me what I can do."

"Count on it," Ashe said as they arrived at the tavern.

They made good use of the boot scrapers outside the door to remove the muck from their boots before entering the facility. After weeks of fresh ocean breeze, the smoke-filled haze and stench of the room clogged Leo's sinuses and made his gut do a sickening roll. It seemed he and Ashe were the only ones who had bothered to clean their boots.

Blinking to acclimate his eyes to the shadowed interior, Leo could see a few patrons sitting on stools at the bar, and a group of poorly dressed men gathered near the back where several tables had been pushed against one wall. He followed Ashe toward the bar, hoping they might get some information from the patrons or barkeep. But before either of them could order a drink, a ruckus broke out at the far side of the room. In one swift movement, the barkeep leapt over the bar and headed toward the uproar of voices. Ashe and Leo followed.

Two bare-chested men were throwing punches, and another man was insinuating himself into the mix, making it two against one.

Several other men formed a half-circle and started wagering on the outcome. The barkeep reached into the fracas and hauled the third man back out of the mix, warning the man that his fighter would be disqualified if he interfered again. Outraged, the man went after the barkeep. The other two men, Leo presumed to be the "fighters," continued to pummel each other, circling, and exchanging hard blows as the crowd thickened around them.

Seeing that the barkeep had lost his hold on the outraged man, who was again teaming up with his fighter against the other fighter, and that the situation was getting out of hand, Leo stepped in to help the barkeep break up the skirmish.

His first mistake was grabbing the man who was winning against his two opponents.

His second mistake was not keeping his guard up.

Blam! The guy planted his hard fist against Leo's jaw and followed with a hook to the ribs.

Grunting in pain, Leo splinted his ribs with one arm and threw a cross that snapped the man's head back. An uproar from the patrons told Leo he was now part of the skirmish and not the helpful bystander he'd intended to be.

Ashe stepped in but Leo waved him back. He didn't want his brother to become embroiled in this mess. He needed Ashe to keep the onlookers out of the fight and off his back.

The men were wild with the new blood being spilled, and they cheered and upped their wagers. Leo heard men betting on *Sullivan* and wondered how those men knew his name, but it was the name *Cal* that made him hesitate. That slight hesitation cost him another punch in the face. But it also afforded him a look into his opponent's eyes.

Stunned. Not daring to hope, Leo gritted out a name. "Cal?"

The man, younger than Leo had initially thought, paused, and stared as if trying to recognize him.

"Cal Sullivan?" Leo asked, his heart pounding with hope… with desperation that his lifelong search would finally reunite him with

his brother.

The young man's eyes grew dark and suspect. "Who's asking?"

"Your brother, I think."

A deep furrow appeared between the man's dark brows. He stared hard at Leo as if trying to recognize him. His brown shoulder length hair looked wild from the fracas, and his lip was bloodied. Finally, he shook his head. "I don't think so." He turned away, as if Leo's presence and his claim made him angrier than the punch Leo had landed on his jaw.

"You have a birthmark on your right foot. Your middle name is Alexander," Leo said to the man's back. "You're nineteen years old. Your oldest brother's name is Leo—and you just punched him in the mouth… and probably broke a couple of his ribs. *My* ribs," Leo said, his voice breaking because he knew then that he'd just found his brother. And it didn't surprise him at all that he'd found Cal in the middle of a fight.

Cal, the little brother Leo had been seeking for more than a decade, turned around, his expression flattened by disbelief. "*Leo*?"

Choking back emotion, Leo nodded because he couldn't speak. His throat was locked and aching worse than his ribs. Afraid that even the slightest movement would shatter this dream, that all his efforts and hours and years of searching would fall at his feet, again, kept him silent.

Cal looked him over as recognition dawned in his eyes. With a derisive snort, he expelled a hard breath. "This is a fine time for you to show up. Where have you been?"

"To perdition and back," Leo said, pushing the hoarse confession from his aching throat.

Frost filled Cal's eyes. "Well, you should have stayed there."

It wasn't as if Leo had expected anything more than Cal's righteous anger because it's exactly what he'd anticipated. And he didn't blame Cal. But it was the emptiness in his brother's eyes, that same hopelessness in the eyes of the bedraggled children on the streets outside, that nearly took Leo to his knees. He'd failed Cal in

the deepest sense of the word.

"What do you want?" Cal asked, wiping his bloody lip with the back of his hand as the restless crowd demanded he finish the fight.

Despite the pain in his side, Leo straightened to face his brother man to man. "Can we go somewhere to talk?"

"What could we possibly have to talk about?"

Before Leo could respond, Ashe stepped in and addressed their little brother who wasn't so little anymore. "Cal, stop being a hardhead. We need to talk with you."

"Who the devil are you?" Cal demanded, but in the next instant, his eyes registered his recognition, and he said, "Ah bullocks, *Ashe*. So you've both come. *Finally*… and too late." With that Cal dismissed them both and turned back to his opponent, a thick-chested, big-fisted man who was still breathing hard. "Let's finish this."

The man grinned, raised his beefy fists and backed up to draw Cal back into their imaginary ring. Before Cal finished taking a step in, the man swung hard, his haymaker making a wide arc toward Cal's exposed jaw. But that fist never landed. It never had a chance against Cal's jab that shot straight out and connected with a sickening pop against the man's mouth and jaw. The poor chap's head shot back, and his body followed the backward momentum, dropping him on his hind-side with a thunderous thud that rattled the dirty floorboards and the glasses behind the bar.

The crowd's gasp was followed by a loud cheer.

Leo exchanged an incredulous look with Ashe.

Ashe arched one eyebrow. "Still the same old Cal."

"It appears he hasn't changed a bit," Leo replied, but that observation worried him deeply.

"You're lucky that's not you down there," Ashe said, half grinning and gesturing with his chin toward the bleeding man on the floor.

"Had Cal not recognized me, I would most assuredly be that man's companion." To see that Cal was a skilled fighter who could

take care of himself was a blessing and a curse. Because if Cal talked, reasoned, and settled disputes with his fists, there was little hope of Leo and Ashe having any meaningful reunion with their brother. And Leo wanted, no… he *needed* to talk with Cal, to hear about his life, and to let his little brother know he'd never forgotten him, that he'd never stopped looking for him.

But Cal had dismissed them. He ignored them as he collected his money and walked toward the back of the tavern. There, he swept his shirt off a chair and exited out the back door.

Leo and Ashe followed Cal outside only to see that he was already half a block from the tavern. He was speaking to a woman holding a small child, and it appeared Cal was giving her the money he'd just collected. Questions shot through Leo's mind. Could Cal be married? Could that be his wife and child? What was Cal doing here? As Leo watched with his thoughts in a spin, the woman kissed Cal on the cheek and hurried across the street. Cal continued walking away.

"Cal!" Leo called, but his brother kept going, his back rigid, his stride long. Exchanging a look with Ashe, Leo said, "I'll take his best shot if that's the only way to talk to the hardhead."

"He'll have to pummel both of us," Ashe said, and they broke into a run.

Seconds later, Leo and Ashe caught up with their angry brother, flanked him on both sides, caught him by the elbows, and jerked him to a stop.

Cal wrenched his arms free and gave them both a shove that sent them stumbling forward two steps. When they turned to face him, he met them with arms folded across his chest and a mile-deep scowl on his face. "What is it you want?"

"To tell you that I've been looking for you," Leo said.

"Well, you found me. Now you can go back to wherever you came from."

"Crane Landing."

Cal's brow furrowed. "Huh?"

“I came from Crane Landing,” Leo said. “It’s an oceanside town in Southern Maine. I live there and work at a shipyard.”

For the second time, Cal snorted, but this time there was a half-laugh in the mix. “How could you possibly think I’d care to know anything about you?”

In Leo’s pained silence, Ashe spoke up. “Cal, don’t be cruel—”

With a slash of his bloodied hand, Cal silenced Ashe. Eyes blazing, he faced down both of them. “I’m being cruel? You left me in that church, Ashe. You were so enamored of your rich new parents, you didn’t even look back to see me waving goodbye. And you,” he said, turning on Leo with a vengeance. “You did nothing to stop that miserable father of ours from hauling us away. I know we had next to nothing, but it was home… *my* home. And I didn’t want to leave.” Seething, Cal gripped Leo by the shirtfront and pulled him nose-to-nose. “You *told* Dad to take us away. I heard you!”

Leo felt such self-loathing it was a struggle to keep his legs beneath him. By the expression on Ashe’s face, he felt just as sick at heart.

“Why?” Cal asked, the word ground beneath his teeth like gravel beneath a bootheel. “Why did you hate us?”

“What?” Leo stared, utterly stupefied by Cal’s comment. “I thought getting you away from Dad was the only way to keep you safe. I did it because I cared about you.”

“Rubbish!” Cal shoved Leo away in disgust. “You expect me to believe that?”

“It’s the truth,” Ashe said, coming to Leo’s defense.

“How would you know?” Cal glared at Ashe. “He told Dad to get rid of all of us. I heard him.”

Leo had never said that, and hearing Cal twist his words to justify his rage was not going to stand. “That’s not what I said, Cal. I asked Dad to take you to Aunt Betty’s because it was the only way I could think to keep you out of the path of his brutal fists. It was the only way I could protect you.”

“Well, it didn’t protect us. It nearly killed us. You broke up our

family and forgot about us. I'll never forgive you for that."

"Cal, if I'd had any idea what he'd planned I would have fought him to my last breath to protect you. I'm sorry," Leo said, wringing the words from his throat. Words he'd waited so many agonizing years to say.

"Your apology is worthless."

A blow from Cal's hard fist would have done less damage. Cal's words shattered any hope of reconciling or making amends. But Leo couldn't walk away.

Pulling the leather tie from his hair, he grabbed Cal's hand and slapped the tie on his brother's callused palm. "This is the shoelace from your shoe, the one you kicked off the day Dad took you away. I picked it up and vowed to bring you all back home as soon as I could protect you from Dad. From the moment I learned our father abandoned you, I haven't stopped looking for you." Leo gazed straight into Cal's blazing eyes. "I never forgot you, little brother."

No matter how much Cal had changed, Leo could still read his brother's eyes. Cal was better at hiding his feelings now, but even a fleeting glimpse told Leo that he'd scored a knockout shot.

But Cal was a fighter and he wouldn't give an inch.

Knowing there was nothing more he could say or do at that moment, Leo told Cal they were staying at the CPR Hotel.

"I don't care," Cal said. "Go back to Crane Landing and forget about me."

Leo shook his head. "I can't, Cal. I'll never stop trying to bring us together again as a family."

"I have no family." With that, Cal turned and started walking away.

"Cal!" Ashe hollered after him. "Those people, my parents, didn't ask if I wanted to go with them. I didn't have a choice. And I didn't look back because I couldn't bear it."

Cal's footsteps faltered, but he didn't stop or even look back.

Chapter Thirty-Six



Grace hadn't been sleeping well; a few hours a night at most. Even so, she rose just before dawn each morning, needing a ride in the fresh air to brace herself for each day of surviving without Leo, without her life at Crane Landing.

Dressed in a lightweight shirtwaist, blue riding habit, and a tall pair of riding boots, she braided her hair, then headed downstairs.

Once outside, the briskness of the cool, Pennsylvania morning felt good against her skin. As she'd done since she was a young girl, she headed for the barns, taking the gravel lined path that meandered up and then veered left for a ways before leveling out as it led to three huge barns that constituted Fairview's roots in harvesting food from the land. These days, the only thing harvested on the grounds was hay for the fine horses her grandfather kept in one of the barns, which was a well-kept stable.

The huge double doors were already open at each end and a whistled tune could be heard coming from one of the stalls. Grace had expected as much. In fact, she'd been counting on it. She headed inside to find Saul in her mare's stall, freshening the hay, while her mare ate from a pail of oats a short distance away.

"Good morning, Saul." She held up her hands, showing him two shiny apples. "I brought each of you a treat."

A warm grin lit his face as she tossed him one of the apples. He caught it out of the air, rubbed it once against his soft, worn work shirt, and then took a healthy bite of it, nodding at her as he

chewed. “Thank you,” he said around a mouthful.

Grace murmured a soft hello to her mare as she gently rubbed the animal’s neck. “I missed you, sweet girl.” The horse nickered, bobbed its head, and then found the fruit in her palm.

The sounds of slurping and chomping continued from both man and beast—and Grace smiled, the sounds warming her heart… like Willy’s laugh and the sound of Leo’s voice. She looked over at her honorary brother and was awash with love.

“Saul, I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “For what happened that night at the inn and for how I left without telling you.”

Saul stopped chewing and patted her shoulder. “It’s okay, Gracie. Granddaddy said you would be safe, and I shouldn’t worry. He said you had to leave Fairview for a while, so I promised to take care of your horse, and that’s what I’ve been doing. Every day.” He motioned to her mare. “She looks good, don’t she?”

To know that Saul had been living his days without worrying about her was a gift she hadn’t expected—and one that reaffirmed her grandfather cared deeply for Saul. It wasn’t that her grandfather didn’t care about people. It was that he claimed them as his property to be managed and protected. That’s what her marriage to Devon was about—a way to join two powerful families and ensure that Grace married a man she liked and would want for nothing.

But she felt bankrupt.

Fearing she might cry a river, she pressed her face against her horse’s strong neck, breathing deep. “You did a wonderful job, Saul,” she whispered. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen her coat shine more beautifully. I meant to tell you this when I came back, but I got caught up in other things. So thank you for taking care of my sweet girl for me.”

Saul beamed under her praise. Together they fed and watered the other horses. They talked liked they used to and at other moments just shared a communal quiet with the animals.

Saul was a gentle soul, and Grace realized as she readied her mare for a ride that her honorary brother was at his best and

happiest right here, on the grounds of Fairview, where he could care for the animals, fish the river, and help with all manner of things at the main house. Whatever choices she would have to make for Willy and for herself, she could rest easy knowing Saul would be fine right here.

AS LEO LOOKED out the window of his hotel room, the dismal scene below reflected his mood. Leaning his head against the windowpane, he released a long groan of despair. It seemed nearly everything he cared about in his life had been lost. Half of him wanted to howl in anguish. The other half wanted to put his fists through something.

Grace was gone.

Cal was gone.

And Leo felt lost.

He just couldn't scrub the image of Cal's eyes from his mind… the condemnation he'd seen there, and the angry snarl that had bent Cal's lip. A fury burned hard in him that Leo couldn't soothe.

Despite Cal's assertion he had no family, that momentary flash of surprise in his eyes had revealed a vulnerable side of him that Leo needed to reach. He believed his brother still cared about their connection, and that kindled a small hope in Leo's heart.

Dragging a palm over his face, he winced at the tenderness in his jaw, compliments of his brother's rock-hard fist. The ache he'd hoped to ease by finding and talking with Cal was still there in the pit of his gut because Cal was glaringly unhappy. Or maybe he'd just been unhappy with Leo. There was nothing more to be done for his brother, though, other than give him time. It was glaringly apparent that Leo's siblings weren't children anymore. Gray had grown up in a home with love and kindness. Whatever his troubles were now, Leo believed his brother was smart enough to handle it. River was safely tucked in the bosom of a loving family. So maybe

it was time to let go, to turn his attention to his future—but a future without Grace and Willy seemed unattainable.

Did she really love Kettering as she'd claimed?

Was that why she'd seemed more outraged than afraid the night he'd kidnapped her? Because she hadn't wanted to be carried away from the man she loved? Leo had honestly believed that, after her initial shock, she'd be happy and perhaps even grateful to learn that her father was alive. And she had been. But she'd lost something irreplaceable too. Discovering that her grandfather had betrayed her had broken her—and *that* was why she'd wanted to come to Crane Landing. Not because she hadn't loved her fiancé.

Had she been receptive to Leo's suit only because she was angry with her grandfather? Or had her kisses, her words, her every action with him been as real as they'd felt for him?

Releasing a hard sigh, Leo turned away from the window. No matter now what was in her heart. He'd broken her trust. She'd had the same look of condemnation in her eyes that he'd witnessed in Cal's eyes. However unintentional, Leo had betrayed them both.

LEO AND ASHE waited two painfully long days for Cal to cool his anger and come around to talk, but their little brother never showed. So they, and several crew members, spent nearly ten days searching for him. They combed through the East End of London street by street, tavern by tavern, but no one had seen him. They frequented the bare-knuckle boxing matches that took place in back rooms of pubs, but Cal wasn't among the fighters. His snubbing of them and subsequent disappearance made it clear he wanted nothing to do with them.

After days of fruitless searching, Leo agreed with Ashe that they'd done what they could to let Cal know they hadn't forgotten him.

"I can hire men to continue looking," Ashe said, "but I need to

head back to the states."

"I'd gladly help pay the bill if I thought it would help," Leo replied. "But it won't. You and I both know Cal doesn't want to be found. He's clearly got more friends here than enemies. They're not about to share his secrets."

Still, Leo held out hope that his hardheaded brother would eventually come around. The flicker of emotion in Cal's eyes when Leo had given him the shoelace had been real… and raw. In that brief moment, Leo knew he'd reached his little brother. Although his connection with Cal had been broken by years apart and an ocean between them, he believed Cal would someday be ready to talk with him. Because whether Cal appreciated it or not, he now knew that his big brother had never stopped caring or looking for him.

"Leo, you've done all you can to let Cal know you haven't forgotten him," Ashe said. "Now it's for him to decide if he wants to be part of our family again."

"What if he doesn't want to?" Leo asked, his gut in a knot just thinking about the possibility.

"Then there's nothing we can do about it," Ashe replied. "But my money says he'll come around when he's had time to think things through."

Leo sighed to release the tension in his shoulders. "I hope so."

"Me too."

For a moment they were silent as if weighing the probability of Cal ever making his way back to their family. "We need to call River as soon as we get stateside," Leo said. "That way when Gray calls home, she can tell him we found Cal and he's in London."

BY NINE THE NEXT MORNING, Leo and Ashe were seated within a busy coffeehouse, a hearty English breakfast of fried eggs, bacon, and toast on the table between them. While the coffeehouse was

located within the City limits, Leo could still see from its front windows the buildings that housed too many East-Enders crowded into poorly ventilated, one-room dwellings.

"Why would our brother become a pugilist here, fighting for pay in rough backrooms?"

"Why did any of us end up where we did?" Ashe asked, a challenge in his voice. "Don't punish yourself with thoughts like this." He speared a bite of food on his fork. "We each landed where we did by no choice of our own. I like to think that we've each done the best we could with what we've been given in life."

"I suppose you're right."

As a male server refilled their mugs with rich-smelling coffee, simultaneously passing them each a copy of *The Times*, Leo nodded his thanks. He took a drink of the hot brew. Almost immediately the sounds surrounding them in the popular coffeehouse diminished to merely background noise. The coffee was that good. Just like Ashe said it would be.

Too bad their meeting with Cal hadn't been as pleasant.

Frowning, Leo sat back and snapped the paper open. The hours and days he and Ashe had spent searching for Cal didn't bear thinking about. "Our hardheaded brother deliberately dodged us," he said to Ashe as he scanned the headlines. "I wouldn't be surprised if he was just two steps behind us the whole while, encouraging his friends to remain tight-lipped and plagued with a short memory when asked about his whereabouts."

"He probably paid them for their silence."

"Or maybe he's that revered throughout the rookeries."

"Or that feared. The boy has a wicked right hook," Ashe said, eyeing the fading bruise on Leo's left cheek.

"Agreed. But however he's managed to avoid us, Cal has definitely become a ghost."

Wondering how their brother could so callously ignore them wasn't solving anything so Leo turned his attention to the newsprint in front of him.

The Times, a popular daily newspaper first published more than one hundred years ago, according to Ashe, was filled with more information than a man would want to hold in his head. Still, Leo scanned the headlines, trying to keep thoughts of his youngest brother at bay.

It proved impossible.

Images of Cal kept butting in, especially of him stating in no uncertain terms that there was no future for them as brothers, or even for the Sullivan siblings to reunite as a family. Did Cal really blame Leo for every wrong ever done to him, including their father's abandonment? To think Cal had lived so many years misunderstanding the situation explained why he'd been so callous. It was as if, like a wound roughly healed, too many layers of scar tissue covered Cal's heart for him to feel anything.

But for Leo, just knowing his youngest sibling was alive—that Cal was holding his own even in a world that could be cruel and unforgiving—was a balm for his conscience.

As Grace's father had once taught him, there was a time to wait for the tide and a time to chase the wind. Leo had chased the wind. All the way to the slums of London. Though wildly grateful to finally find Cal, to know he was alive, there was nothing left to do but wait for the tide to turn, for Cal to realize he had brothers and a sister who cared and wanted him in their lives. Hopefully, he would find his way back in his own time…

Now if only Grace would find her way back to him, to his aching arms, and to the life he'd imagined for them.

Sighing and rolling his shoulders to release the tension gripping them, Leo forced himself to focus on the newsprint in front of him. In the pages preceding advertisements for a brewery in Bath and auctions taking place in the next two months at various addresses along Bond Street, he spied a column that stopped his heart.

Filling nearly half a page was a story about an American heiress whose father had miraculously returned from the grave only to die again, this time for real.

Grace…

Leo's heart banged hard in his chest as he devoured news of his lost love as if watching an impending train wreck. He didn't want to see it… but he couldn't look away.

Written more like a gossip sheet than a news report, the piece highlighted the young heiress's heartache over losing her father and mourning his death a second time, and applauded her strength for moving forward with her upcoming nuptials as planned. In less than two weeks, she was to "marry Devon Kettering at a private ceremony at the home of her grandfather, railroad magnate Joseph Fairview, who'd raised Miss Covington after the untimely deaths of her parents."

Slamming the paper on the table, Leo surged up and out of the chair. "I must return to the states at once," he told Ashe, who was startled by his outburst.

Eyebrows raised, Ashe asked, "Is something wrong?"

Leo nodded once toward the newsprint. "That story there, on the right. The one about an American heiress. It's about Grace."

Ashe found the spot, read the words, and blew out a breath. "So your girl is going to marry someone else?"

"Not if I can help it."

"Sounds as if it's a done deal," Ashe said.

"Nothing is done until her wedding, which will be to me, if I have anything to say about it." He tapped a finger on the newspaper. "What if Grace didn't go back to Philadelphia because she wanted to marry Kettering? What if she went back because I was an idiot? She left because I hurt her," he confessed to his brother. "Grace would have stood beside me and let everything crash around us, but I betrayed her trust. I hurt her. What a presumptuous fool I've been."

He glanced out the window at the nearby rookeries and abject poverty that dwelled there, and then looked around the busy coffeehouse at the well-dressed men readying for productive days. There existed a very thin line between hopelessness and a

prosperous, happy life. Just one misstep in either direction could create a dream or shatter it like glass.

Ashe watched him closely. “What are you plotting?

“I’m going back. I’m going to get Grace.”

“Then let’s go, brother. *Silver Flame* is provisioned and ready to disembark the minute our feet hit the deck.”

Leo tossed several bills on the table to pay for their meal, and the two of them exited the restaurant.

A mere twenty minutes later, Leo had packed his trunk and settled his bill at the boarding house. Then he prayed all the way to the ship that the weather would hold and he could reach Grace in time to stop her from making a mistake neither of them could undo.

Chapter Thirty-Seven



With a gasp of outrage, Grace slapped the morning newspaper onto the parlor sofa where she'd taken her tea. Incensed that her grandfather had announced her wedding to Devon in the newspaper, she headed into her grandfather's library, determined to corral him before he could slip off to another business event or concoct some reason to avoid her.

Without preamble, she went straight to where he sat working and placed her palms on the desktop. "How dare you, Grandfather! I only agreed to releasing a story about me reuniting with my father, not to announcing a betrothal I'd broken or a wedding I haven't planned."

Her voice and abrupt appearance seemed to startle him, but he recovered nicely by pushing his chair back. "Good morning, dear. Come sit, and I'll ring for tea."

"I don't want tea. I want to know why you did such an underhanded thing," she said, standing resolutely before him. "Why would you try to force my hand like this?" She shook the newspaper beneath his nose. "I won't stand for it."

"Victoria Kettering and I agreed it made sense to keep your original wedding date and proceed with all prior plans. It will hopefully silence the gossips."

Grace's jaw dropped.

"Why so shocked, dear? I'm simply moving forward with your original plans and doing my best to ensure a good future for you."

“Which I have not asked you to do,” she said through gritted teeth, “and I’ve had enough of your meddling.”

His eyes narrowed. “I beg your pardon?”

“I am not a pawn on your chessboard, Grandfather. And I’m perfectly capable of managing my own affairs.”

“I beg to differ,” he said, offense thick in his voice, his expression wounded. “I am doing my best to make sure you are well situated and provided for, Grace.”

“Is that what you considered it when you lied to me about Papa being dead? When you had him jailed? Was that your way of looking out for my future?”

“Grace, we’ve been over this—”

“No, you presented a few facts and justifications!” She slashed her hand through the air to cut him off. “That’s not good enough. You lied to me about my father. Why would you have done such a thing when you know how much—” her voice broke “—how much I loved him? You’ve never really explained what caused you to do such a horrid thing. That question is burning a hole in my heart,” she whispered. “I need to know why. What happened?”

Instead of answering, her grandfather got to his feet, using his wide shoulders and piercing eyes to back her off as he’d done with so many others. “This is best left alone, Grace.”

“I can’t leave it alone any longer. I have to know what happened. I know you’re not telling me everything,” she said, resolute and unyielding. “I want the truth. All of it. Every wretched detail.”

“You know the truth! Your father killed your mother. And my wife,” he said, his face mottled by anger.

His lashing voice backed her up a step, but she refused to concede. “The boating incident was an accident.”

“Yes, an accident caused by your father’s foolhardy and selfish act. Four people perished because of him. You deserved to have your mother in your life, and your grandmother who adored you, but your father took them from you. I wasn’t letting him take

anything else from you. He went to prison because he deserved to be there."

She didn't want to believe her father had knowingly put them all in harm's way, but a cold trickle of doubt cut a path down her spine. "How was the accident his fault?"

"He lied. He assured me the vessel I chartered was sound, that it could weather the storm that hit us. But he was wrong. I knew it, and I told him to take us back to the dock. I even threatened him, but he refused to alter our course. He insisted we could sail through the squall." Her grandfather balled his fists at his sides. "You were on that boat, Grace! He *knew* that and yet he pushed ahead."

"But… he was a good captain. Surely he would have known the danger and if he could navigate through inclement weather."

"Maybe so," her grandfather snapped, "but he wasn't sailing his large schooner, and Saul's father and I were not his seasoned crew members. He overestimated the ability of the boat, and he asked too much of Carl and me. I'll never forgive him for risking your life and taking away my wife and my… *my* little girl," he said, finishing with tears in his eyes.

Memories of that horrid moment whipped through her like an angry wind. The sound of her grandfather's broken sobs and desperate screams for his wife and daughter still echoed in her mind. He'd pulled Grace to the surface and kept her afloat in the pounding waves while the world around her became a maddening nightmare.

Trembling from the memory and the raw pain in her grandfather's eyes, she could see all that her father had taken from him. That truth sank deep, and she understood the agony her grandfather had been living with, and how that had broken him. But in his vengeance, he had compounded her loss to an unbearable level. Because he had knowingly cut her father from her life.

"I understand why you hated him," she said quietly. "But it was wrong of you to rip him from my life. I loved my father, and I needed him more than ever after Mama died. How am I supposed to

forgive you for that?"

"I don't expect you to. But I want you to know that everything I've done is for *you*, Gracie, not because I hated your father. I hated that he put his pride above your welfare and it nearly cost you your life. He wasn't fit to raise you or even be near you. He was a criminal—"

"He made a mistake. That doesn't make him a criminal."

"It most certainly does!" he insisted, slamming his fist on a stack of books that toppled off his desk. "He took everything from us. He caused the death of *four* people. Why can't you understand that? Why would you have wanted him in your life?"

"Because he was my father!" Her outburst echoed through the room, but she didn't care if the staff or the neighbors or the whole city heard her. "I didn't deserve to lose both of my parents because of one man's mistake and another man's vengeance."

"Oh, Gracie, it wasn't an act of vengeance," he said quietly, exhaustion seeming to settle on his shoulders like ballast. "It was an act of love, to save you from your father's bad decisions. The boating accident wasn't the first time he'd put your life in jeopardy. He took you and your mother to Haiti when you were five years old. He knew the island was raging with disease at that time, but he and his crew went ashore anyhow—and they brought that plague back to the ship. Your mother got desperately ill, but you nearly died, sweetheart. You were just a little girl… *his* little girl and he knowingly put you in danger." Her grandfather sagged against his desk as if the conversation had aged him a decade. "Three of the crew died, and you spent two months in bed and came so close to —" His voice broke and choked off his words. "I'll never forget the drained look in your eyes, so dark and sunken, in your sweet little face… I thought it was your last night on earth, and I just wanted to lie down and die with you."

A torrent of emotion rushed through her to think of all her grandfather had endured, and lost, and struggled to hold on to.

Dragging in a ragged breath, he continued. "Your father did love

you, Grace, but he put his needs and bravado before your welfare time and again. The boating accident was the final straw. I knew he was planning to take you away from here thinking he could raise you on that ship of his. It was no place for a child, and I didn't trust him to keep you safe, so I put a stop to it the only way I could."

The revelation seemed to suck the oxygen from the room, leaving her dizzy and reeling. It was hard to believe her father would have had such disregard for the safety of his own wife and daughter. But her father had been a dreamer. He'd been charming and playful, almost boyishly so now that she thought about it from the perspective of a grown-up and not through the eyes of a child. He might have thought himself invincible and in control in those days. She didn't doubt his love for her or her mother, but she was beginning to see her father through her grandfather's eyes.

"Did Papa get sick on that voyage to Haiti?"

"He did," her grandfather replied. "It seems the illness left your father susceptible to disease, and he succumbed while in prison. That's why I got him released the second time."

"And yet it was with the understanding that he was to never contact me again?" she asked, expecting her anger to flare only to realize it had burned itself out. All she felt now was a deep sadness for all of them.

He nodded, his expression contrite. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you the truth and that my actions wounded you so deeply. Hurting you in any way is the last thing I'd ever wanted to do. I'd just wanted to keep you safe from your father's bad decisions, and the only way to do that was to keep him out of your life. You were just ten years old, Grace, too young to understand this at the time. I was the only one left in this world who would put you and your welfare first. And that's all I'm trying to do now."

The conversation and hard revelations were a lot to take in, but somehow it settled the part of her that had raged against her grandfather. She was beginning to understand just how awful things must have been for him all these years. He'd been grieving deeply

for his wife and daughter while struggling to protect his granddaughter and also raise her and Saul.

Despite the lies and losses she'd endured, her heart softened. "I wish you would have told me all of this years ago."

"In hindsight, I do too." He slipped his large hand over hers and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I hope someday you'll be able to forgive me."

She no longer knew if it was a matter of forgiveness or just a tragic, heartbreaking mess created by too many bad decisions. And she was too heart-weary to face any more battles. "Granddaddy, you need to know that I can't marry Devon because I'm not in love with him."

"Oh, sweetheart, your friendship with Devon will carry you through the rest of your life. I'm not going to live forever, and you're going to need a husband who can provide for you and Willy, and for Saul who will likely remain at home for his lifetime."

"I understand that," she said. "But I'm capable of managing your accounts. I don't need to be married to do that. I can be comfortably independent with all of this," she said, arcing her hand out to indicate the whole of Fairview.

A shadow seemed to flit through his eyes as if there was something he wasn't sharing with her. "You know that's impossible, Grace. You're a woman, and you have no experience in business matters. Devon has been groomed from birth to manage an estate, and he'll be the one managing mine and taking care of you and Willy and Saul."

His refusal to let her off the hook with Devon or acknowledge her abilities set her teeth on edge, but she didn't want to create more of a strain between them when they were finally making progress.

She needed time to think on things, then she would revisit this subject and get her overly-protective grandfather to see her as an intelligent and independent woman capable of managing her own affairs.

OUTSIDE, Grace walked to the stable, saddled her mare, and took a long ride across the estate. Eventually, she found herself at the Kettering mansion. Fifteen minutes later, she and Devon were sitting in the Ketterings' expansive garden. Although they were alone, Grace knew there was more than one pair of eyes watching from the windows.

"What has upset you?" Devon asked, concern marring his handsome face. "You seem deeply troubled."

She was, and so she told him about her conversation with her grandfather, pouring out the complicated story about her past. When she finished, she felt utterly deflated. "At least I know the truth now. But I feel as if my grandfather is keeping something else from me, and I just can't tolerate another secret that might bring my whole world crashing down on me again."

The same dark shadow flickered through Devon's eyes that she'd seen in her grandfather's expression during their argument. "It's probably nothing," he said, but for the first time ever, she didn't believe him.

"You know something, don't you?" Ignoring the censuring looks she knew would be coming from inside the mansion, she slipped her gloved hand over his. "Please, I simply can't bear any more shocking surprises."

"It's nothing for you to worry about."

"Then you know what's plaguing my grandfather?"

"I do." He tugged at his shirt collar as if it had suddenly grown uncomfortably tight. "Will you trust me that it's an issue your grandfather and I are capable of handling? Truly, Grace, there's no need to concern yourself."

"But I am concerned. Is my grandfather ill?"

"Not that I'm aware of. We are simply managing some business together as your grandfather prepares me to take over the Fairview estate, after we're married of course, and when the managing of the

estate becomes too much for him."

Dread threaded its way through her veins. "Devon, you know I love you…"

"Of course," he replied, his eyes assuring her that he did indeed know she loved him. "Is something amiss?"

"You deserve more than I can give you."

A quizzical look crossed his face. "I expect nothing more than the love and friendship we already have."

"The last thing I want to do is to hurt you. But, Devon, I will hurt you if I marry you. You deserve more than friendship from your wife."

His dark eyebrows furrowed. "What are you saying?"

"I can't marry you because you deserve a woman who can love you passionately and completely—and who isn't in love with another man."

He reared back as if she'd slapped his face. "So I wasn't mistaken then? You and that chap from Crane Landing were intimately involved?"

"Emotionally, yes. Not… well, not in a way that would make me unsuitable for marriage to another man."

"Do you still care for him then?"

"It doesn't matter. It's over." Admitting it aloud felt as if she were dragging a razor blade across her heart.

For a moment he simply stared at her, his gaze moving over her as if trying to recognize the girl he'd once known. Slowly, he clasped her hand between his warm palms. "Are you certain you're not just confused by all that's happened? Grief and anger can spin one's thoughts in the most absurd directions. There's no rush for us to marry, Grace."

"Have you not seen this morning's paper? Our wedding date has been announced."

The surprise in his eyes gave her the answer. He hadn't known either. "I haven't looked at the paper yet because I've been wrapped up in other business all morning."

“My grandfather and your mother have announced that the two of us will be marrying at Fairview just days from now.”

“This month or next matters not, Grace. I’m ready to marry you today.”

“But I’m not ready.”

“If you’re concerned whether I’ll accept Willy into our home, rest assured he’ll be warmly welcomed and well cared for. In fact, I’ve already planned to give him a puppy to keep him company while we spend a few weeks traveling after our wedding. So no need for you to worry.”

“Oh, Devon…” Tears surged to her eyes, and she struggled to blink them away. “I don’t deserve your friendship, but it’s one of the things I treasure most in life.”

“Then marry me and turn your mind and heart to creating a beautiful, joyful life right here. With me... and Willy… and a puppy.”

She smiled because Devon was such a wonderful man and dear friend. The smartest thing for her was to marry him… to turn her heart away from her past, and a man who couldn’t or wouldn’t commit himself to her, and offer it completely and without reservation to Devon. But her heart simply refused to let Leo go.

Leaning in she kissed Devon’s cheek. “I must go,” she whispered, then got to her feet and rushed across the garden, through the opulent house, and out the door to her waiting mare.

She rode across the property line that connected the Kettering estate with Fairview, and then gave her energetic mare full rein. They flew across a wide field of summer grass and wove through a wooded trail until they came out at the far edge of the groomed lawn of Fairview. She knew the estate like the back of her own hand. She was capable of managing it herself, but her grandfather would never allow it. She knew that with certainty.

And so for Willy’s sake, she would marry Devon Kettering.

Chapter Thirty-Eight



Wedding preparations were underway. With Devon's help, Grace had convinced her grandfather and Victoria Kettering that the ceremony was going to be a simple, private affair. To soften the blow, Grace suggested they marry in Victoria's beautiful garden which seemed to please the woman immensely, though she despaired her friends wouldn't be in attendance. But Devon had stood fast on that condition much to Grace's relief.

Grace struggled to play her part as Devon's intended but she felt hollow inside. Although he deserved better, he'd refused to bow out, and so she'd made a silent promise to do her utmost to make him happy. How she would manage the task while feeling utterly broken inside, she didn't know. She was just putting one foot in front of the other at the moment.

For Willy's sake.

Because she had no other choice.

Because Leo hadn't loved her. He hadn't made promises or commitments. He'd crossed an ocean and left her behind.

The dressmaker had delivered Grace's wedding gown that morning, and it now hung in her bedchamber. In less than twenty-four hours, she would be promising herself to Devon Kettering for the rest of their lives.

Oh, Mama, I wish you and papa were here. Her mother was supposed to be helping her into her wedding gown, and her father was supposed to be giving her away, transferring the responsibility

of her safekeeping to Devon. But none of that would happen.

Sinking onto the parlor sofa, Grace nested her face in her palms and fought back tears. Crying wouldn't change a thing. Her mother and father were gone. Leo was gone. And her life was moving forward whether she wanted it to or not.

The sound of approaching footsteps brought her head up.

With concern etched in his face, Devon sat beside her on the sofa. "Are you ill? Is something amiss?"

Forcing a wobbly smile, she shook her head. "I'm just tired and a little overwhelmed."

He slipped his hand over hers. "There's nothing for you to worry about. Everything's going to be fine."

"I hope so."

"It will." He patted her hand and got to his feet. "I believe your grandfather is awaiting us in the library?"

"Yes. He's being quite secretive about the purpose of our meeting, so I can't prepare you ahead of time."

Devon laughed. "I'm sure I can manage whatever surprise or request your grandfather is about to make."

Grace had no doubt. Devon was a competent and extremely bright man with exemplary business sense, according to her grandfather. Still, with the complicated past she shared with her grandfather, she couldn't help feeling apprehensive.

To her surprise, the mood in the library seemed almost festive as she walked in on Devon's arm. Although it was too warm outside to light a fire in the fireplace, she saw three large candles burning there, giving the room a cozy feel. A platter of canapés and another of various cheeses sat on a side table along with decanters of wine and spirits, all flanked by three glasses.

"Come in, come in," her grandfather said, smiling broadly as he rose to his feet. His back had healed enough that he no longer needed the cane, but Grace knew her beloved grandfather was aging. Life had been hard on both of them. "Madeira, my dear?" he asked, lifting an empty glass in one hand and the largest of the

crystal decanters in the other.

“Sounds lovely,” she said. Maybe if she drank enough she wouldn’t feel the excruciating pain cutting through her body. Maybe it would help her embrace a future with Devon… help her forget Leo and Crane Landing and all the people she loved there.

After her grandfather poured two fingers of Irish whiskey for Devon and one for himself, he settled himself in his leather chair.

Grace and Devon sat together on the matching sofa where her grandfather had entertained his business friends for years, and where Grace used to take naps as a girl while her grandfather worked at his desk. They had spent more time in this room than in any other with the exception of the dining room. This place of books and sweet-smelling cigars and manly furniture was where she and her grandfather had played games and laughed together, where they’d debated and argued with each other, and where they’d clung to each other and wept with broken hearts.

“I’ve been waiting a long time for this day, Gracie,” her grandfather said, drawing her wandering thoughts back to the present. Setting aside his whiskey glass, he reached for something beside his chair and came up with a thick, homemade book bound on one side with a blue ribbon. “This is for you, sweetheart.”

Intrigued, Grace placed the heavy volume on her lap. When she opened the cover, she saw her mother’s name written on the first page. Curiosity aroused, she turned the page. There she saw a daguerreotype of a baby with wispy hair and bright eyes dressed in a christening gown. Beneath the picture was her mother's name and birthdate and a notation that she was four weeks old. The image on the next page was of her mother at a year old. Three handwritten pages followed in a journal of sorts detailing her mother’s growth from an infant to her first steps. Mesmerized, Grace moved slowly through the pages of her mother’s life, reading passages written in her grandmother’s hand as the woman documented the life of her beloved daughter.

Rivers of emotion streamed through Grace as her mother came

back to life in the pages of a book written with immense love and adoration. Her grandmother had kept the book her entire life, documenting the marriage between Grace's parents, celebrating Grace's birth and childhood and many small, meaningful moments they'd shared or experienced together as a family. The people Grace loved so deeply were memorialized in this personal journal, their lives lovingly documented by the matriarch of her family, and for the first time in years it felt as if they were all right here with her.

Trying to find her voice, she met her grandfather's eyes and found them filled with love. "This is…" She drew in a shaky breath. "It's so beautiful." Splaying her palm over the cover of the book, she felt the love of her mother and father and grandmother. "Thank you, Granddaddy. I know how difficult it must be for you to give this away."

"I'm passing it down, Gracie, not giving it away. It belongs with you now. It's up to you whether you'll continue our story."

Could she do that? Could she write with the scrupulous honesty and deep love that her grandmother had penned throughout all those years? And if so, would Grace only share the joys, or would she also write about her grandfather's betrayal and her lost love?

"I'll do my best," she said. And she would. She would do her best because that's all anyone could do.

"So tomorrow's the big day," her grandfather said to Devon. Grace knew he was turning the conversation to give her a moment to gather herself.

"My mother is aflutter preparing the garden and planning our wedding meal," Devon replied with a chuckle. "And she's still grousing about the lack of guests at one of the most esteemed events of her life."

Grace's stomach did a sickening flip. "She hasn't invited anyone, has she?"

"No." Devon slipped his hand over hers where it rested on the most important book she'd ever read. "She has promised to respect our wishes."

And so it went for nearly an hour as they talked about the wedding and the move Grace would be making to the Kettering's estate.

Tomorrow.

It was just before sundown when they heard the clatter of a fast approaching carriage outside on the graveled drive. A few moments later, their butler entered the library and announced two guests.

Grace rose to her feet along with Devon and her grandfather, prepared to meet their guests who were most likely businessmen here to see her grandfather. But she was utterly thunderstruck to see Leo Sullivan stride boldly into the room followed by his brother Ashe.

Her legs melted beneath her, and she sank onto the sofa.

"Captain Sullivan, I thought we agreed you'd not show your face here again," her grandfather said, making it clear to all that he wasn't pleased by Leo's unexpected arrival.

"No, sir, that was your request, and I never agreed." Dismissing her grandfather, Leo turned to her. "I need to speak with you in private please."

Her heart was thudding so hard it left her breathless. She wanted to talk with him, to be alone with him, to have him confess his undying love for her, but whatever he had to say was coming too late. "I'm afraid that's impossible, Captain. Devon and I are presently discussing our wedding plans with my grandfather."

"Then you will all want to know what I have to say." He moved across the room like a dashing wind-blown pirate coming to carry her away. Standing before her, he asked, "Grace, do you love me?"

Her breath sailed out on a gasp. That he could ask such a personal question right in front of her grandfather and her fiancé was not only grossly impolite but wildly insane. How was she to possibly answer such a question? And yet, he stood there looking at her as if he expected an answer.

"You should go," she said, now physically shaking.

He didn't go. He spoke to Devon. "If you truly love Grace, don't

force her to marry you."

Outrage washed across Devon's face as he came to his feet. "I would never force Grace to do anything she didn't want to do. She has her own mind and is quite capable of making her own decisions without my interference. And she has chosen to marry me. So I suggest you take your leave now before you cause any more offense."

"Is that true?" Leo asked, his dark gaze locked on her. "Do you truly wish to marry this man?" He thumbed toward Devon.

"This man is my best friend," she said quickly in Devon's defense, agitated by Leo's impolite gesture.

"Is friendship enough for you?"

"That's not your affair," she said, watching his jaw clench, knowing he was frustrated by her refusal to answer his question.

"All right then, Grace. Let me put my cards on the table. I love you. I'll stand in front of these men or the rest of the world and declare my love. But I won't, I can't, stand by and let you make a mistake that can't be undone. Because once you commit to this man, your commitment is for life."

"I'm aware of that," she snapped, furious that he was here now when he could have said these things to her in Crane Landing and saved so much heartache for everyone. "But you're the one afraid of commitment, Captain Sullivan, not me. It's what people do when they love each other. And I do love Devon. I always have and I always will. He's my friend, and not once has he ever betrayed me."

Leo visibly winced. "I hadn't meant to betray your trust, Grace."

"Well, you did."

"And that's all I need to know, Captain Sullivan," her grandfather said, stalking across the floor until the men were face to face. "Please see yourself out. Now."

Before either man could move, the library door burst open and Willy ran in. "Leo!" The boy shot across the room and threw himself in Leo's arms. "Are we going home? I told Saul we could take him there when you came to get us. I want to show him our house and

take him fishing with me and Robbie."

The intense joy and longing in Willy's eyes echoed what was in Grace's heart. But there was so much more at stake than what her heart wanted. She was making choices to provide a secure life for her brother, something she couldn't do with a man who might love her but didn't respect her, who would go against her wishes behind her back, who still wasn't making any promises.

Her grandfather took Willy by the shoulders and gently turned him toward the door. "You can see Captain Sullivan when we finish our business, son. Close the door on the way out."

Willy hung his head. "Yes, sir." He slogged across the floor and pulled the door shut behind him.

Leo and her grandfather clashed gazes again, neither man looking away. Ashe and Devon stood back, but Grace could see that both men were ready to step in.

"Stop this nonsense right now," she said, pushing to her feet to stand beside Devon. "Granddaddy, please sit and allow the captain to say whatever it is he's come to say."

Reluctantly, her grandfather stepped back but he didn't sit. With a sweep of his hand, he said, "Speak your piece and be quick about it."

"I'll start with you then," Leo said, addressing her grandfather. "We're both guilty of hurting Grace because we were trying to protect her. Because we love her. Despite my good intentions, I betrayed her trust by telling you where to find her. I thought I was doing the right thing for her, but I can see now it wasn't my place to do so." He turned to Grace then, his eyes filled with remorse. "I didn't want you to lose your family because I know how much you love them." He took a few steps to close the distance between them. "What you don't know, what you can't possibly understand, is how crippling it is to be the one who breaks the family ties or refuses to mend fences."

"I wasn't going to stay away from Fairview and my grandfather forever. I just needed time to…" Her words disappeared because

she realized she'd just wanted to hold onto her anger. Because feeling angry was so much easier than enduring the bone-deep grief that assailed her when she lowered that shield. "I just needed time."

"I didn't realize that. I'm sorry I intervened and that I did so without asking what you wanted," he said. "And I want to apologize for not being honest with you. I've kept things from you because I was too ashamed to tell you, or anyone, what I'd done. But you deserve to know everything. The reason my father took my brothers and sister away is because *I'd* asked him to."

Stunned, she stood silent, her mind reeling.

Leo's jaw clenched as if beset by memories that infuriated him. "I thought my father was taking my brothers and sister to my aunt's house. I didn't know he'd dumped them at a church until it was too late for me to find them. If I'd have kept my mouth shut—"

"Then five of you wouldn't have found wonderful families," she said, interrupting his confession. Because that was the truth from what she could see.

"But if I'd kept my own counsel, Cal wouldn't have suffered a wretched life."

"You can't know that for sure," she said, recalling how awful his father sounded. "Life with your father was surely the worst life imaginable."

"I do know that Cal suffered. I found him in London."

Her jaw dropped.

"That's why I couldn't commit to anything else, not for myself, and not to you, until I found my brothers and sister. I owed them that much."

Suddenly she saw it all clearly, the pain shadowing his eyes, his secrecy, his unwillingness to commit. "So it's not because you didn't care about me?"

"Oh, Grace…" He took one last step forward, closing the distance between them and clasping her hand. "I thought you knew how I felt about you. I should have told you. But I'm here now, and willing to tell the world I love you."

Devon extended his arm and gave Leo a firm nudge to back him off. “You overstep yourself, Captain Sullivan.”

Ashe moved forward then, but to Grace’s relief, Leo waved him back and simply stood there awaiting a response from her. But it was beyond her at the moment because she was so stunned. And confused. And hurt.

“Granddaddy, could you…” She inhaled and straightened her spine. “Could you and Ashe please give Devon and me a moment alone with Leo?”

It was apparent in his stiff posture and disapproving face that her grandfather didn’t want to leave the room, but after a moment’s hesitation he turned and gestured for Ashe to proceed him out into the hall.

When the door closed behind them, Grace gestured to the chair and sofa. “Please sit. I can’t bear to discuss this… this awkward situation with you both hovering over me.”

Devon planted himself beside her on the sofa, but she knew it was an act of protection rather than possession.

Leo sat across from them in her grandfather’s chair and met Devon’s accessing gaze without flinching. “I am truly sorry to intrude in your life this way, Mr. Kettering, but I simply can’t walk away from the woman I love.”

“Nor can I, so speak your piece and let’s be done with this… interruption.”

“All right then.” Leo turned his dark eyes on her again. “I’ve done all I can to make amends with my family. As I said, I had to do that before I could move forward with my own future. I’m ready to do that now. With you. If you’ll give me that chance.”

Those words were everything she’d wanted to hear, but they’d come too late. She’d already promised to marry Devon. She couldn’t break that promise. He deserved better.

Still, memories assailed her. From the minute Leo had pulled her from the Schuylkill River and whisked her off into a new life, her emotions had been in a spin. Leo, the daring man who’d risked his

own freedom to reunite her with her father and had brought Willy into her life, deserved her eternal gratitude, not her anger. He'd overstepped and left her feeling betrayed, but he'd done it for her.

The feel of Devon's hand slipping over her clenched fist where it rested on her knee, startled her. She'd been snared in the web of so many memories, all of them with Leo, that she hadn't wanted to return to the mess at hand.

"I can see you're troubled over this," Devon said. When she glanced up, he gave her a sad half-smile. "Do you return Captain Sullivan's feelings?"

His softly spoken question pierced her heart. She couldn't lie to him. But how to tell him the truth without wounding him now that she'd promised to spend the rest of her life with him?

"Shall I take your silence as an affirmative answer?" he asked.

She blinked hard to ward off tears, but they came anyway. "Oh, Devon…"

He gave a small nod then, as if he understood far more than she did. "If this is what you want, I'll stand aside."

She shook her head because it wounded her too deeply to ask that of him.

"I will, Grace, but if he ever hurts you, I vow I'll hunt him down." He pinned Leo with a hard stare. "That's a promise, Captain Sullivan."

Respect rather than fear flickered in Leo's eyes, and he gave Devon a small nod. "I will do the same should Grace decide to move forward with your wedding."

"Then I'll leave the two of you to talk so she can determine her course." He stood and looked down at her. "However we go, Grace, we go as friends."

Pulling a handkerchief from her skirt pocket, she nodded and wiped her streaming eyes. The sound of his shoes clicking across the hardwood floor, and then the sound of the door opening and closing, mingled with her sniffles.

Leo slid off the chair and came to one knee before her. He

slipped his hands over her forearms and gave them a gentle squeeze. “I’ve missed you so…”

His handsome face, framed by his loose dark hair that smelled lightly of sage and cedar, was so close she wanted to lift her hands and press her palms to his whisker-shadowed cheeks. “You could have saved us all so much heartache,” she whispered.

“I wish I had.” He ran his fingers across her jaw, then wiped her cheek with his thumb. “And I’m sorry I couldn’t.”

She nodded because she understood now why he’d refused to make a commitment to her. He was the kind of man who lived up to his promises no matter what. And he couldn’t have made a promise to her until he knew he could keep it.

“Can you forgive me?” he asked, tilting her chin to bring her gaze back to his. “Can you understand why I’ve done the things I’ve done, and that I would sooner cut off my arm than hurt you?”

Wiping her eyes, she eased back, and his hand slipped away. “Yes, but I need a promise from you.”

“Anything.”

“You must never again break my trust. You must respect me enough to know I’m capable of making my own decisions. And you must trust me enough to share everything with me.”

“I won’t, I will, and I do,” he said, a smile growing on his face.

“Then why was your hair tie, that you seemed to have lost again, so important to you?”

Grief washed over his face, and his shoulders sagged. It seemed as if he had to pry the words from his heart to tell her the tie was a lace from Cal’s shoe. By the time he’d shared the whole story of his long search and heartbreaking reunion with Cal, tears blurred her vision.

“So I’ve finally returned the shoelace to my brother, and I can move forward knowing I’ve done what I can to reunite my family,” he said, exhaustion heavy in his voice.

It all made sense now: his inability to commit to anything until he’d fulfilled his promise to his siblings; the reason he’d

overstepped and contacted her grandfather because he hadn't wanted her to suffer the loss of her family as he had. "Why didn't you share this with me?" she asked.

"I was ashamed of what I'd done. And it wasn't your burden to carry." He gave her fingers a gentle squeeze. "Your heart was already overburdened by grief."

"But couples are supposed to share their troubles."

"Are we a couple then?" he asked, his gaze holding hers.

This was what she'd wanted to know back in Crane Landing, and so she turned the question back on him, knowing she needed a clear answer once and for all… for good or bad. "Couples commit to each other. They plan a life together. They love each other enough to be honest with each other. So you tell me, are we a couple?"

"With all my heart, *yes* on every count. I'm committed to you. I want a life with you. My love for you is so vast it spans the oceans and circles the stars." He cupped her cheek and brushed her jaw with his thumb. "I fell in love with you in that smoky back room of the tavern when you smashed Harwood's hand with his mug."

A breathy laugh escaped her over his silly declaration and the memory of that wild night.

"I knew I wanted to marry you the minute you opened your eyes on my ship and called me a blackguard and a lowly pirate. So will you please accept this scoundrel's proposal?"

"Are you asking me to marry you?"

"With all my heart," he declared with such passion it made her heart skip a beat. "Will you marry me and make me the happiest man alive?" When she hesitated, he said, "Please don't make me kidnap you again."

Releasing a watery laugh, she said, "Yes, Captain, I'll marry you."

In one swift movement, he stood and brought her to her feet in front of him, then kissed her. By the time he'd finished, she was in a near swoon.

Pressing a hand to his chest to steady herself, she said, "That

was… quite exuberant."

"Just my way of helping you make sure you're choosing the right man."

"Leo, darling, I'm choosing both of you."

His eyebrows raised and his mouth hung open.

Releasing a light laugh, she looped her arms around his neck. "I'm choosing you as my husband, and Devon as my lifelong friend. I expect you both to accept that arrangement."

"I believe we already have."

A HARD KNOCK sounded on the library door just before it was pushed open and Joseph Fairview stepped inside. When he saw his granddaughter in Leo's arms, his frown deepened. "What is going on in here?"

Leo stepped to her side, but kept one arm around her. "I've asked Grace to marry me, and she said yes."

"Utter nonsense!" Fairview barked.

Devon and Ashe had followed him into the room, both men carrying themselves with the confidence and prestige of wealthy men. No one would guess they'd come from such different backgrounds.

"So you've decided then?" Kettering asked, no sign of anger or offense in his voice as he spoke to Grace.

Her eyebrows pinched and her eyes were full of heartache. "I'm sorry, Devon. This is such a painful and awkward situation, for all of us actually. Be assured that I will deliver my apology and the news to your mother in person."

"You will do no such thing!" her grandfather declared, his voice sounding almost frantic and even a bit fearful as it cracked through the library. "You have promised to marry Devon tomorrow, and that's what you'll do."

Offended by the man's outburst toward Grace, Leo stepped

forward to shield her. “No sir, she’ll be marrying me.”

A derisive look crossed the old man’s face. “And how do you propose to provide for her? You can’t offer my granddaughter the kind of life Devon can give her. If you truly care for her, walk away.”

“Is this a business transaction then?” Leo asked. “Or is this about Grace’s happiness and the life she wants?”

“It’s about what she needs,” Fairview said. “Can you give her this kind of life peddling wares with your one little boat?” he asked with such arrogance it raised the hair on Leo’s neck.

It apparently raised Ashe’s hackles too because he took two powerful strides across the room that put him within arm’s reach of Fairview. “My brother can give her far more than that because he’s got a whole fleet of vessels in a business that is continuing to grow and isn’t overextended like your railroad business.” At Fairview’s shocked look, Ashe continued. “I’m a businessman, too, and I know what’s going on in your industry. It’s falling apart. So tell me, is Grace’s marriage to Kettering just about securing her future or are you securing your own as well?”

“How dare you!” Fairview exploded with outrage. “Everything I’ve ever done is for my granddaughter, to protect her, to support her, to secure a good future for her.”

“That’s obvious,” Leo said, cutting in before things got totally out of hand. “Had I any doubt of your love for Grace, I’d have never told you where to find her. But know this, sir, I will lay my life on the line for her without question. My hands are the ones that will protect her and support her and hold hers when she needs me. And they’re the ones that will fight for her and provide for her. I can and will take care of her in whatever manner she desires,” Leo said, assuring Fairview he could and would do so. “Don’t force her to do something that will break her heart. She’s suffered too much of that already.”

Fairview, albeit visibly taken aback by Ashe’s abrupt defense of Leo, and Leo’s bold declaration, seemed impressed. “It’s true then

that you're invested in your brother's trade business?" he asked.

"The fact that you're questioning my brother's integrity is a slight I'm going to overlook. Once," Leo said, giving the arrogant man a clear warning not to tread in those waters. "I'm invested in his trading company. But you should know I'm not yet a partner. I'll have to earn that, which I fully intend to do."

As they stood there measuring each other it was as if Leo could see Fairview's opinion of him changing. Inch by inch, the man seemed to deflate until he was leaning against his desk.

"Any other questions?" Leo asked, ready to meet any challenge Fairview wished to present. Because he intended to settle all issues before leaving the room.

Instead of probing, Fairview turned to Grace. "Do you wish to marry Captain Sullivan?"

She cast a look of apology at Devon, before meeting her grandfather's eyes. "I do."

With a tired sigh, he dropped his gaze to the side table where the canapé and cheese assortment remained untouched. "I suspect this means you'll live in Crane Landing?"

"It will," she said quietly. "But we can't visit each other."

Fairview grunted. "Devon," he said, turning his balding head to look at Kettering. "Is there anything you want to say?"

"Only that she deserves to be happy, sir."

Fairview folded his arms over his chest and continued to address Kettering. "I'm not sure how I'll make this right with you. You know my situation is strained at the moment."

"There's nothing to set right. Our business arrangement still stands."

Surprise crossed Fairview's face. "You wish to continue our deal?"

Kettering gave an affirmative nod. "I do. I still have a lot to learn from you. I plan to get my money's worth."

A soft guffaw came from Fairview. "You're a good man, Devon."

"Yes, he is," Grace said, casting such a loving look at the man it

gave Leo's heart an uncomfortable tug. "I hope you can forgive me someday," she said softly.

"There's nothing to forgive," Devon said, and Leo believed him. It spoke volumes about the man's character… and his love for Grace. Kettering gestured toward Leo who was still at Grace's side. "Captain Sullivan was willing to fight for you. I can see it wasn't even a question for him. That's the kind of man I'll step aside for. It's obvious he loves you, Grace, and I want you to be happy, so I'm bowing out and wishing you every happiness."

At that point, all eyes turned toward Fairview. Slowly, he pushed to his feet. "If this is what you truly wish, to marry Captain Sullivan, you have my blessing."

With a whispered *thank you* she moved in and gave him a hug. Then, to Leo's surprise, she went to Kettering and slipped her hands over his, clasping them with intensity. "Thank you, Devon. Truly, you are my dearest friend… always."

"And you mine," he said, gently pulling his hands from her grasp. "Now you should probably call Willy in and share the news with him. I suspect he'll be over the moon." With that, he released her, told Leo to take care of her, and headed for the door.

"Hold up, Devon. I'll walk you out," Fairview said. He clapped Ashe on the shoulder. "Join us," he said, and the three of them left the room.

Alone for the first time since Grace had left Crane Landing, Leo drew her into his arms and held her close. "I'm sorry this was so painful. I wish it could have been otherwise." He eased back and tilted her face up to his. Gazing into the eyes of the woman who owned his heart, he placed a soft kiss on her forehead. "I promise to spend every day of the rest of my life loving you and doing my best to bring you happiness."

A tremulous smile tilted her lips. "I intend to hold you to that vow."

"No need, my darling. When I make a promise it's with my whole heart."

Chapter Thirty-Nine



To keep the chinwags from gossiping about the Ketterings, Grace's grandfather had paid a visit to the owner of the newspaper and convinced him to print a correction to the previous article about Grace's wedding plans. The new article stated the paper had incorrectly named her fiancé as Devon Kettering but that engagement had been previously dissolved in a mutual and amicable manner, and she was in fact marrying Captain Leo Sullivan of the Middleton Trading Company. The paper issued an apology to the families for the mistake.

How her grandfather had orchestrated that public correction, Grace didn't know, but she was glad that Devon's family wouldn't suffer gossip because of her.

Leo and Willy had returned to Crane Landing with Ashe on his ship, and Grace and her grandfather had followed a few days later by train. Their time at Fairview and on the train had given them time to talk, and although the conversations were sometimes painful they were also healing. By the time they arrived in Crane Landing, Grace and her grandfather had formed a new bond, one of shared heartache, forgiveness, and love.

Grace had returned to her beautiful cottage by the ocean while her grandfather rented a room at the Beacon Inn. Although she hadn't had time to personally call on her friends, she'd sent handwritten invitations with a note of apology for the short notice. But she wasn't waiting another minute to marry Leo. Today was the

day.

Her emotions were surprisingly steady, perhaps because she knew she wanted this union more than anything. Still, when the sound of footsteps came from behind her, their slow yet purposeful gait signaling that her grandfather had entered the room, her heart did a little cartwheel.

She turned, drawing in a steadying breath as her eyes met those of the man who'd spent his life trying to protect her. Something seemed to have let go in him, and he smiled like he used to smile at his wife and daughter.

"Just look at you," he murmured, his voice husked with emotion. "You are your mother and grandmother blended into one beautiful woman."

For her, there could be no greater compliment. "Perhaps it's this," she said, touching the edges of her veil. It was held in place atop her head with a tiara woven with orange blossoms—the same tiara her mother had worn decades ago, lovingly created by her grandmother.

"It's that and more, Gracie. It's the woman you've become. They would be so proud of you. Just as I am. I realize now that you've chosen a good man in Leo. I'm sorry I didn't recognize that sooner. I intend to spend the rest of my days making up for it."

Grace knew her grandfather's apology didn't come easily for him or without great thought. "Leo *is* a good man, Granddaddy, and I can't wait for you to get to know him better."

"Then let's get you married so that I can properly welcome my new grandson-in-law into the family." He offered her his arm.

"Thank you for being here, Granddaddy. It means so much…"

"Thank you for allowing me the honor of giving you away," he said, his voice husky with emotion. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be, imp."

The sound of her nickname resonated like a comforting song from her childhood. Moving forward, she slipped her gloved hand into the crook of his elbow, linking the two of them and moving

forward as family.

Finally, at long last, she was about to become Mrs. Leo Sullivan.

As she began her walk down the beach to where Leo stood waiting for her, it struck her that just a week ago she'd been dreading a wedding she didn't want—yet here she was, minutes away from marrying the man of her dreams.

Gathering around Leo in the morning sunlight on the beach were the family members, friends, and crewmen who meant so much to her and to Leo.

Warmth spread through her as she spied Fogg gussied up in his finest and talking with Devon, Mary Crane, and her younger brother, Micah, most likely sharing one of his adventurous sea stories. Other crew members of the *Destiny* talked amongst themselves, each dressed in his best in honor of their captain's wedding. Saul, tugging now and then at his collar, stood with them, beaming with pride at having made new friends. Nearby, Adam and Rebecca did their best to keep Finn from plopping down in the sand and digging in what looked to be a cluster of fresh shells washed up by the last high tide. And just a few feet away, Willy and Tyler, looking adorable in their short-trousered suits and matching hats, struggled to keep Robbie from jumping in the water where he seemed determined to go. The two had bathed the dog yesterday. Now his coat looked soft and fluffy as he trotted circles between the boys.

These beautiful people would celebrate with her and Leo today and would be with them going forward, supporting their marriage and helping to nurture their children. It was more than she ever could have imagined, and her heart was overflowing with joy and love.

STANDING beside the minister atop the small dock where he and Thomas had once spent hours discussing the intricacies of wind

speed and currents, Leo nearly had to pinch himself to believe the moment was real.

Gilded in sunlight, her smile radiant, Grace was a vision moving toward him. Every person in attendance looked on in silent admiration as she made her way to his side.

When the minister asked who would give this young woman into Leo's keeping, her grandfather proudly answered, and *willingly* placed Grace's hand in Leo's.

In that moment, everything but Grace blurred into the background. With all his heart, Leo promised to love, honor, and cherish her for all time… and she replied with her soft voice and warm smile that she would be his forever love, and then they were pronounced husband and wife. He wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her as he had the night in the cove, but that kind of kiss would have to come later, after their guests departed. For now, he honored his beautiful bride with a tender kiss and a twirling hug that left her breathless and laughing.

The morning was filled with good wishes and hugs and laughter that rolled down the beach and filled their hearts. As they celebrated together, Leo watched Grace move among their guests, looking like a polished pearl in her wedding dress. Willy had kicked off his shoes and turned up the legs of his trousers, and had apparently encouraged Saul to do likewise, and they were wading in the surf with Robbie.

This was Leo's life now, he thought, his gaze taking it all in. His beautiful bride and the young boy they both adored, and Grace's honorary brother, and sometimes one stinky dog, were his family. For the first time in his life, Leo felt he'd finally come home.

One by one their guests cleared away the food and the dishes, shared their final good wishes, and then got on their way. A sharp whistle from Robbie's owner sent the dog down the beach in a mad dash for home. With the dog gone, Willy was eager to head out and show her grandfather, Saul, and Devon around Crane Landing, which seemed to please all of them. Willy was beyond thrilled that

he would be spending the night at the inn with Saul and her grandfather.

As they waved goodbye, Leo promised he and Grace would meet them all at the inn for breakfast the next morning. Then hand-in-hand they ambled out onto the dock where they'd spoken their vows and joined their lives.

"Are we really married?" Grace asked, her gaze traveling out to the horizon. "I'm worried I might be dreaming all of this."

"We really are married, Mrs. Sullivan," her husband said, circling her waist with his muscled arms and turning her to face him. "And we're finally alone. I was beginning to wonder if the dog and the others were planning to spend our wedding night with us."

"I wouldn't have minded the dog staying," she said, making him laugh and playfully nuzzle her neck. "What a perfect day…" she whispered. "I've loved every second of it."

"Perfect in every way, my beautiful bride."

"Mmm. I like the sound of those words."

"Which words—*perfect in every way*?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Ah, could you mean *Mrs. Sullivan?* Or *my beautiful bride?"* At her nod, he grinned. "It's for all time, you know, this business of you being Mrs. Leo Sullivan."

"It's a dream come true," she said, the thought of being his wife so amazing she could barely grasp it all.

As twilight wrapped about them the sound of waves washed against the shore and slapped against the dock. Above them, stars began winking to life as the sun's light slid away.

Her husband, so handsome in his wedding finery, pressed a kiss to her forehead, his eyes dark as he gazed down at her. "You are so beautiful," he said, his voice soft in the evening air. "I can smell wind in your hair, and see every nautical mile we've traveled together in the depths of your eyes. I see how much you love our cottage and this land and the vision of the life we will build together right here." His hands gently cupped her face. "You belong

here, Grace. With me."

"It felt like home the minute you brought me here," she said softly.

"I can see how every person you've met in Crane Landing has become imprinted on your heart. To know you love my family and friends as much as I do is such a gift." He lowered his hands and linked his fingers with hers. "I've been lost for so long, somewhere between a rocky shore and the middle of the ocean, but you've brought me home. You've anchored me. I'm finally at even keel because of you, because of your love, because you're everything I could ever want in this life."

"Oh, Leo…. you deserve to be happy."

"I'm beyond happy."

She smiled. "Me too. My heart is so full, I can't begin to express what I'm feeling." For a moment they stood in silence, holding each other as the ocean breeze ruffled their clothes and tossed their hair. "Someday our children are going to play here," she said quietly. "They'll hunt for shells on this beach, and play in the water, and look up at these same stars at night. And their bedtime baths will be a noisy affair that leaves a pile of clothes on the floor and sand in the tub."

"I'm looking forward to all of it. Shall we have seven or eight children?"

"Two will be plenty," she replied with a laugh."

"At least four," he countered as if negotiating a purchase.

"You might change your mind when our children are running wild in our home day and night."

His warm laughter rolled out over the water. "A big family will suit me just fine," he said. "I'm looking forward to the mess and noise."

"You'll be a wonderful father, Leo. And I'll happily welcome however many babies we are blessed with, but I'm glad we'll have a little time before then just for us. Willy is part of our family now, but he's a busy boy with lots of friends. So I suspect that will leave

us plenty of alone time."

"Then let's take advantage of this quiet evening," he said, slipping her hand into the crook of his elbow and escorting her back to the cottage. At the door, he swept her up into his arms and carried her across the threshold. "Welcome home, Mrs. Sullivan."

As she gazed up at him, she kissed his chin and felt the stubble of whiskers he would shave off in the morning. "I believe it's my turn to welcome you home, darling husband." With that, she slipped her arms around his neck, fused her mouth with his, and let him carry her upstairs and across the last threshold to unite them as husband and wife.

Nudging the door shut behind them, he carried her a few steps into the bedroom before gently setting her on her feet.

Moonlight slipped in through the open curtains and gilded their bodies, the sound of the ocean creating a soft hush outside the open window as if telling the world to be quiet, that something important was about to happen. With her handsome husband standing before her in the privacy of their bedroom, his dark eyes seeming to drink her in, it was a moment of great importance for her, and one she knew she'd never forget. Nervous anticipation made her tremble.

"Cold?" he asked, gently rubbing his palms over her lower back and drawing her closer to the warmth of his muscular body.

"No," she whispered, thrilled by his touch, by the intimate sound of his deep voice, and always by his chivalrous manner. She'd never experienced desire until crossing paths with this man, this captain who'd completely swept her away.

His smoky gaze delved deep into her eyes as though he could read her every thought. "You are so beautiful," he said, slipping his palm up to cup her neck. His thumb grazed her jaw, once, twice, and then he lowered his head and kissed her.

It was a tender, endearing kiss that made her moan and lean into him.

"There's no hurry," he whispered against her lips. He framed her face with his hands, hardened from work but gentled by love. "My

arms will always be a place of love for you, a place where you can feel safe and protected."

"And desired?" she asked, an urgency rising up within her that was making her want more.

"Beyond desired." He groaned deep in his throat and kissed her, slowly, deeply, as wave after wave of heat rolled through her body.

Desire rose up in her, strong as the spring tide he'd shown her in the cove that night so long ago, as she clung to his shoulders.

He trailed kisses from her temple to her neck as he freed the buttons on her gown. The heady look he gave her nearly buckled her knees. "May I remove your dress, Mrs. Sullivan."

Breathless and trembling, she could only nod.

After he'd slipped the gown from her shoulders and let it fall to the floor around her feet, he unbuttoned his frock coat and shrugged it off. He tossed it over a chair along with his vest, but when he reached for his shirt buttons, she slipped her palm over his hand.

"My turn."

His raised eyebrow told her she'd surprised him. His grin told her he liked her confidence. "I'm all yours." He lowered his hands to his sides, giving her full access.

Nerves made her fumble but she worked the buttons free and continued until she slipped the shirt off his shoulders. He was like a sculpted statue come to life, all power and might. Emboldened, she placed her palm against his chest, feeling the strong, steady beat of his heart. "What a beautiful man…"

His soft chuckle made her realize she'd spoken aloud.

Heat surged to her face, and she wondered if she'd overstepped herself or created some sort of intimate blunder. "Have I gone too far?"

With a laugh, he swept her into his arms and off her feet, depositing her gently beside her gown that lay puddled on the floor like a frothing eddy. "My dear, Grace, our love is like an endless ocean with no horizons. It's impossible to go too far." He kissed her

then, long and deep, murmuring against her mouth that he'd been waiting a lifetime for her.

His shoulders and chest muscles bunched and steeled beneath her palms, and she realized her touch was enflaming him. The way she was affecting him, and what was happening in her own body, was like nothing she had known before; humbling and thrilling all at once. Trembling from the desire and love and passion coursing through her, she looped her arms around his neck to steady herself.

"It feels as if everything in you is calling to me," she confessed breathlessly, her heart overflowing with intense feelings. "But I don't know what to do."

"I do," he whispered, his gaze darkened with building passion. She felt his hands tremble as he plucked her hairpins free and removed the tiara of fragrant orange blossoms she wore atop her head. Laying it atop the chest of drawers, he lit a candle, then turned back to her and removed the remaining pins in her hair. When her hair tumbled around her shoulders in thick waves, he ran his fingers through it.

"It's like holding sunlight in my hands," he said, eyeing her hair pooling on his palm. He enfolded her in a warm embrace and gazed at her with love. "I'm half out of my mind with wanting you, Grace."

"And I you," she whispered. "I'm ready for the rest of our adventure, Captain."

It was as if she'd beckoned the wind and it filled his sails. His sculpted body tightened and she felt his hands tremble as he helped her out of her underclothing.

When she stood before him, completely undressed, his breath sailed out. "Ah Grace…" His eyes drank her in. "You are stunning…"

When she'd allowed herself to imagine this part of their wedding night, she'd expected to feel embarrassment at this point, but all she felt was a burning desire for her husband's arms.

Within seconds, he'd shucked the remainder of his clothing,

dropping it on the floor with the rest of their discarded wedding finery. He drew her into his arms and walked her backward as he kissed her. When her bare thighs met the bed, he eased to the side and pulled back the hand-sewn quilt. Gently, he lay her back on the cool sheets and downy pillows, and let the soft mattress cushion her as he followed her down.

They came together in a tangle of limbs and hard, heady breaths. Silent, they gazed into each other's eyes, and she saw her own raw need reflected in her husband's eyes. She wanted to imprint every moment of this night to memory, but the emotions… the intensity… and her wild desire was too much and yet not enough…

And so she clung to her husband as he built her desire and carried her into a churning sea of wild craving. There was something she wanted, needed, simply must have right… now…

And he took her there with touches that scorched her skin, with kisses that were so deep and thorough she no longer knew where she ended and he began, and with a love so bright and blinding Grace felt as if he'd drawn her into the barrel of her own kaleidoscope and had tilted it toward the sun. Her moans mingled with his as her world spun and exploded in colorful sparks.

FACING each other with their legs woven together like braided sea grass, Leo gazed into Grace's eyes as he tried to catch his breath. Stroking her hair away from her flushed face, he struggled for words. "I hope you're all right."

"I'll let you know when I return to earth." She captured his hand and mapped his palm with kisses. "So this is what you meant by *taking things too far*," she said.

He heard the awed wonder in her voice as she referred to their night in the cove when he'd told her not to let him take things too far, and it pleased him that she'd enjoyed their lovemaking. "Yeah,

this is what I'd meant that night."

"It felt as if the ocean were swelling inside me like a spring tide, building higher and higher until I went crashing onto the beach. I had no idea…" She released a light sigh. "How often does a spring tide happen in marriage?" she asked.

Her innocent question delighted him. "As often as you like."

"Then I'm willingly onboard for this adventure," she said. Her seductive smile and the feel of her fingers slipping into his hair made his body react.

Drawing her flush against him, he gazed down at his beautiful, playful, passionate wife. "The only adventure I want to have for the rest of my life is in your arms." He planted a lusty kiss on her mouth, making her gasp in surprise. "Care to get swept away again, my love?"

"It will be my pleasure, Captain."

"Yes, it will," he promised.

Hours later, after loving her thoroughly through the long night, Leo marveled at the woman who'd stolen his heart. He'd been searching for so many years and for so many things he couldn't remember a time in his life he'd ever felt rooted or truly at home. But he realized now his home wasn't a place, it was Grace.

She slipped her fingers into his mussed hair. "What is it that's got you so deep in thought?"

"You," he whispered. "You have completely ruined me as a scoundrel. Now I'm just a married man ridiculously in love with my wife."

She smiled, looking so beautiful in the candlelight with her hair loose and tousled around her shoulders, he couldn't resist running his fingers through the soft, golden strands.

"Maybe you should have considered that before asking me to marry you," she said. "Too late to turn back now."

"I suppose it is" He released a long sigh as if consumed with disappointment.

"Well, sir, as long as we're making confessions, I have one to

make too."

He arched an eyebrow. "Do I want to hear this?"

Laughing, she nudged his shoulder. "We just promised to tell each other everything, but if you don't want to know, I'll keep my own counsel."

"All right then, if you must," he said, faking a yawn, "what is this confession of yours?"

"I'm not going to tell you now," she said, flopping to her back in a mock pout.

He popped up on one elbow. "Don't taunt me, woman. The suspense is killing me."

Giggling, she acquiesced. "All right. I was just going to confess that the night I first saw you, in the Lion's Den when you moved toward me, my entire world shifted. I had no idea how drastically you were about to change my life—but somehow I sensed it."

"I felt it too," he said, stroking her hair away from her face.

"You did?"

"Yes, but I never thought to find the love of my life in a smoky barroom or floating in the Schuylkill River."

Her laugh floated across the room like milkweed on a summer breeze. "Thank you for rescuing me and for the wild adventure that guided me into your loving arms, Captain—not that I had any choice in the matter—but I'm so glad you kidnapped me."

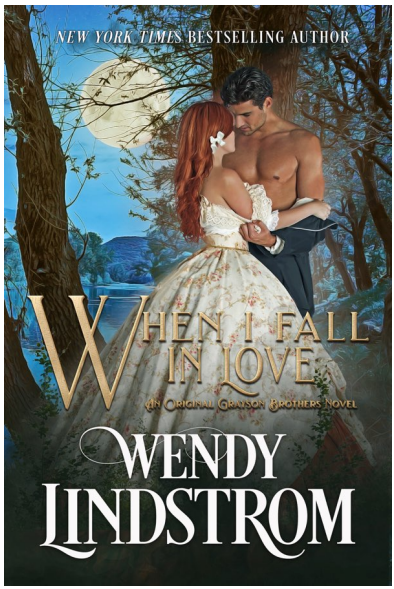
"Me too. More than you'll ever know," he said, gazing down at his beautiful bride, knowing that every storm in his life had been worth navigating because the journey, however difficult, had brought him to Grace, to the love of his life—and the rest of his life.

The End

Want to know how the Grayson Brothers series (with the Grayson and Sullivan families) all began? Read ***When I Fall in Love*** *to start at the*

beginning of their incredible journey. Excerpt on next page.

AFTER the excerpt please TURN THE PAGE
for a special note from Wendy and Cali!



WHEN I FALL IN LOVE
GRAYSON BROTHERS SERIES, BOOK 1

A Mail Order Bride He Doesn't Want—
A Woman He Can't Resist.

The problem is that Nancy Mitchell can't marry the man her father chose for her. Her only escape from the arrangement is to find another husband quick—so she concocts a desperate plan and agrees to become a mail-order bride. When a drastic change in circumstances dumps her into the arms of Hal Grayson, a handsome, grieving man who hates her family, she is forced to rethink her hastily made plan. Can her fierce resolve and inner strength help him piece his world together again even when her own begins to unravel?

Chapter One



As Hal Grayson angled his gouging tool and created a shallow arc in the lid of an oak chest, he tried to lose himself in the scraping, rasping sounds from his carving tools. The rhythmic motion of carving and sanding wood, and the earthy smell of the old barn that housed his woodshop, usually calmed him after a hard day's work at the sawmill. But tonight, nothing could soothe the anger churning inside him.

With an agitated groan, Hal braced his fists on the workbench and dragged in a hard breath, trying to settle his frazzled nerves. He had to finish carving the lid and staining the chest before he could line it with cedar, but his hands were too unsteady to work.

His brother had completely lost his mind.

Hal and his brother John Radford had experienced their share of disagreements over the years, but they always talked it out in the end. That's why Hal believed they would have a successful partnership in the sawmill business, but John's latest decision made Hal question that possibility.

What was John Radford thinking ordering a wife like one might order a piece of furniture? And why hadn't he talked to Hal before making such a foolhardy move? He was thinking only of himself, that's what. He wasn't thinking about Hal, and he sure as heck was not considering the future of their mill.

Hal tossed aside the gouge and slammed his fist on the

workbench. The whole idea was absurd. They couldn't afford the responsibility and expense of another person. That's why they hadn't hired a man at the mill. They were trying to build a business, and Hal was going to remind his thick-skulled brother of that fact as soon as John Radford returned from making their last delivery of pine planks.

How could John have done something so irresponsible and thoughtless? Their sawmill business was just beginning to show a profit, but still not enough support them. The money Hal made building furniture for Addison Edwards was barely enough to cover their monthly payment on the mill and their house. How could John not see that they couldn't afford a single added expense. They ran the mill until dark and built furniture in his woodshop until the wee hours of the morning. They were already working around the clock and couldn't physically work more hours if they had them. They were exhausted. What they needed were extra hands at the mill, not a woman to warm John's bed.

Shaking his head, Hal inspected the chest lid, eyeing the sweep from his last pass with the gouge. He took up a veiner to add finer detail but had to stop several times to take a calming breath and relax his tensed hands before he ruined the piece. Not even the fragrant scent of cedar, his favorite wood, could unlock the tension between his shoulders.

Hal loved his brother, but he could literally throttle John at the moment. Barely a year apart, they were usually lockstep on everything. But just two hours ago John had flippantly announced that he'd found a bride and made an agreement with her. Hal had stood staring at him, open-mouthed and stunned. He still couldn't believe it.

Even now thinking about it made his chest cramp with anger. What a fool-brained and inconsiderate decision.

Hal had told John in no uncertain terms that he needed to break the agreement with the woman.

John just laughed and promised Hal that he'd soon be thanking

him for bringing in a lady who could tend their house and put some decent meals on the table. Then he said he needed to deliver the lumber and drove out of the mill whistling a happy tune as if their conversation was over and Hal's opinion didn't matter.

Oh, no, it was a long way from over.

Hal blew out a breath and flexed his fingers. He needed steady hands and a clear mind for carving such a detailed piece. One wrong arc with the gouge could ruin the whole lid of the chest. But his head felt ready to explode and concentrating on the intricate detail proved impossible.

The sound of the barn door banging closed signaled his brother's return.

"John! Get in here," he hollered. They were going to have it out and get this problem resolved so Hal could clear his mind and get back to work.

When Thomas Drake stepped inside, Hal's irritation jumped a notch. Not because he didn't like the man. Drake, a dark-haired somewhat stocky man about Hal's age, was actually becoming a friend. Hal liked and greatly respected his competitor, but he wasn't interested in leasing his sawmill to the man.

Hal tossed the veiner tool onto the workbench and raised an eyebrow. "I suppose you're here to bend my ear about leasing the mill?"

"I wish I were," Tom said quietly. Hal expected to see a grin light Tom's face as their back and forth was becoming a bit of a friendly debate that Drake seemed to enjoy. But there was no light in Tom Drake's face. All Hal could see in the man's eyes was pain. "There's been an accident, I'm afraid."

Hal's heart started pounding.

"The axle on your wagon broke and —"

"Is John all right?" Hal asked stepping toward Drake. "Has he been hurt?"

Tom's shoulders seemed to deflate. "I'm sorry, Hal. Reggie Orwald found him beneath the wagon, and it was… it was too late."

An ocean roared in Hal's ears. He heard Drake talking but felt as if he were floating in thick liquid that made it difficult to move, to breathe, to understand.

"The front axle broke and the wheels snapped off. We suspect John was thrown off the seat. The crash surely startled horses and... well, it seems they pulled the wagon over top of him."

Shaking his head, Hal backed away from the words that were pelting him like shards of ice.

His back slammed into the workbench, jarring his tools, shattering his composure. Crushing pain gripped his chest. His breath came in ragged gasps. He couldn't get enough air.

"Your brother is at Doc Kinley's house."

"No. This must be a mistake." Hal glanced toward the door, expecting his brother any minute. "John was delivering a load of pine planks. It can't be him."

Thomas wrung the black cap he held in his hands. "Reggie didn't know John and thought he might work for me. He came by the mill to let me know about the accident. I went to Doc Kinley's to make sure my suspicion was true before I came to see you. I'm sorry Hal, but it's your brother, John Radford."

Gut-punched by the news, Hal sagged forward, his back against the workbench, his knees barely able to support him. It couldn't be true.

"I'll help any way I can," Tom said, his voice coming from the end of a long tunnel.

A loud buzzing filled Hal's ears, and his body quaked. The smell of cedar wood shavings that he loved so well turned his stomach.

It couldn't be true.

He'd just talked with John. They hadn't even finished their argument.

How could his brother be... dead?

John was smiling when he left the mill. He was happy—and alive!

Oh, God.

Oh, no...

Dear Mr. Grayson,
I will be arriving the Dunkirk station June 2nd at 6 o'clock.
I look forward to meeting you in person.
Your intended,
Nancy Mitchell

HAL GRAYSON FOLDED the mud-spattered letter and jammed it into the pocket of his dusty trousers. He clenched his fists around the reins and directed his team of rented horses toward the Dunkirk train depot and a meeting he did not want to have.

He should be delivering a load of cherry planks to A. B. Edwards Furniture store, not meeting his brother's intended. But his brother, John Radford, couldn't make the trip because he was…

Dead.

Hal squeezed his eyes closed and then opened them wide trying to clear the gut-wrenching nightmare he couldn't seem to awaken from. His brother, John Radford, was really gone.

On any other day, the clip-clopping sound of the horses' hooves and rattle of the wagon would have rocked Hal into an easy state of woolgathering. But today even the singing birds and warm sunshine on his shoulders agitated him. How could life go on as normal when everything was upside down? How could his strong, healthy brother be dead?

Dropping his forehead into his palm, Hal squeezed, trying to force the image of John's inert body out of his mind. "You should have listened to me," he whispered, his throat thick with grief and love. Hal lifted his face to the breeze, deeply regretting that one of his last conversations with his brother had been so heated and upsetting.

But John's insistence that they needed a woman to tend their

house and prepare their meals had vexed Hal. It wasn't that he'd disagreed with John that they needed a caretaker for their home. They worked sixteen hours a day, wore their clothes for days at a time before washing them in the creek and tossing them over a sagging clothesline to dry. They barely slept. They ate apples and eggs and bread given to them by their neighbors. Their small house had grown dirty and remained scantily furnished, a sad fact neither of them had time to worry about. They were too busy trying to keep their sawmill business afloat.

That's why Hal wouldn't entertain the idea of John taking a bride because they couldn't afford the expense.

They'd been hunting bigger dreams.

Hal and John were making monthly payments on a small home and sawmill they were buying from Tom and Martha Fiske. They believed if they worked hard, they could earn enough money to help their father as well. Progress was slow, but Hal was earning income by carving spectacular pieces for Edwards Furniture store and also partnering with John in their new sawmill. They had made their first whole dollar of profit the week before John died.

That's when John had revealed that he'd advertised for a wife—and that he'd found one.

Miss Nancy Mitchell, a gal from Buffalo, had answered John's advertisement.

Her train would arrive in a few short minutes.

With a snort of disgust, Hal sat upright and turned his wagon onto Central Avenue and headed toward Dunkirk. Leafy maple trees lined the street on either side, reminding him of one of his favorite areas back home in Buffalo.

The irony of meeting his brother's intended made his gut burn. How could John have accepted a bride he'd never even met? Little wonder that John hadn't a clear thought since receiving Miss Mitchell's letter. That's likely what distracted him from noticing the problem with the wagon wheel until the axle snapped in half.

A flood of regret and anger filled Hal's chest and restricted his

breathing. He wanted to shout out his pain and hurl it past the leafy tops of the maple trees. He wanted to howl and rant and force time to move backwards so he could rescue his father's new sawmill from being repossessed by Lloyd Tremont—and save his beloved brother from death.

But it was too late.

And so Hal drove toward the train station because there was nothing else he could do.

Sick to his soul over the whole mess, Hal pulled up at the depot and parked the wagon. Sunshine streaked across the hard-packed yard and bleached the wooden slats on the platform of the depot. Other carriages and wagons were arriving, perhaps to fetch a friend or family member coming in for a visit or to send a loved one off on their own journey. The expressions of anticipation or trepidation on the faces around Hal indicated both. Neither of those emotions were present within him, however. He was too numb to feel anything. And this was merely a bit of business he needed to deal with so that he could return to work.

Still, he wondered what his own expression revealed. Grief? Agitation? Anger?

Dread. That's what he felt inside. His stomach ached with dread as he stepped down from the driver's seat. To even mention John Radford's name wrung Hal's insides. To reveal such tragedy to Miss Mitchell would be gut-wrenching. What would she think of this turn of events? Would she offer quiet condolences and return home? What else could she do?

What else could anyone do?

A howl of grief rose up in Hal's throat, choking him. He sucked in sharp breaths as he strode to the ticket office. Five minutes later, he stood on the platform, fists clenched, waiting to meet his brother's mail-order bride.

AS THE TRAIN came to a stop at the Dunkirk station, Nancy turned from the window where she'd been watching the landscape pass and sat up to adjust her hat. Her heart ached, and she was scared and terribly homesick for all she'd left behind. She hadn't wanted to leave. She loved her family deeply and had never thought to run off this way.

But staying would have forced her to do something that would have broken her sister's heart.

Better that it be her own heart she was breaking.

Passengers folded newspapers, straightened skirts and coats, gathered their children and valises, and began departing the train.

Nancy stood, wavering with indecision, the ribbons on her hat left untied. What if John Grayson didn't like what he saw? What if he decided he didn't want to marry her?

Her stomach rolled, and for the life of her she couldn't seem to draw a full breath.

She was running away.

She was going to marry a man she'd never met.

And she'd lied to secure John Radford's agreement.

Mile after mile she had practiced her name Nancy *Mitchell*, she silently repeated. *Mitchell... Mitchell... Mitchell.* Changing her last name was necessary because... because the Grayson family hated her father.

She had heard her father state this truth to her mother in a recent discussion they'd recently had over supper.

Nancy didn't know much about the Grayson family because they socialized in different circles, but her father knew Daniel Grayson well and seemed to consider the man a friend. Other folks spoke highly of the Grayson family, so when Nancy found John Grayson's advertisement seeking a bride to join him in Fredonia, she grasped his offer with both hands and answered as Nancy Mitchell, using her mother's maiden name.

The lie was necessary, and yet the deception ate at her. Her only comfort came in knowing she would do all in her power to be a

good wife and to create a loving marriage with John. She would tell him the truth as soon as it was possible to do so, when she felt he might understand and forgive her this one falsehood.

But withholding information was a form of lying, too, and so it was more than one lie on her conscience.

She'd also lied to her cousin James to get him to deliver her and her trunks to the station.

So many lies! Nancy gripped her stomach fearing she might be sick. The lies bubbled like acid in her gut, eating at her.

A young lady in a stylish blue dress and matching cape exchanged a warm glance with her handsome young escort as they passed Nancy's seat. Their love for one another was obvious. Nancy envied them. Would she and John ever look at each other with that same warmth? Or would he ultimately hate her because she'd lied to him?

Adjusting her gloves and smoothing her skirts into place, Nancy told herself there was nothing to do but to step off the train.

Negotiating her way to the door on shaky legs proved difficult. She used the high seat backs to keep herself upright and moving through the car. As she stepped from the train, she clutched her small reticule and surveyed the milling crowd. Not one face looked familiar. Not one person approached her.

What if he'd changed his mind? What if he'd gone back to Buffalo?

Clasping a palm over her roiling stomach, she scanned the crowd.

Laughter and shouts of joy sounded around her as families and friends reunited. She hooked the wrist chain of her reticule over her forearm and straightened her shoulders. Her legs trembled as she stood on the platform with too many people casting curious, probing looks at her as they rushed to and fro.

Where was he?

As the porter deposited Nancy's three trunks on the platform, she tried to present herself as a confident woman rather than a

nervous girl still in her teens—another falsehood. Smoke billowed from the gasping train and made her eyes tear as it pulled out of the station. Her stomach felt upside down and her breath came shallow and fast. The letter she'd received from John Radford was kind and assured her of his character and his intent. Surely, he would be here. She would just have to wait for him to approach and hope he found her acceptable. And she prayed she would find him acceptable in return because if she didn't... her life would go from bad to worse.

One pleasant-looking older man asked if she needed assistance, and for an instant she was hopeful he might be John Grayson. Unfortunately, the man had come to fetch his brother returning from Albany. So, Nancy waited while the crowd thinned, observing each man who passed, wondering if this one or the next would smile and announce himself. Not one of them did. The longer she stood alone the faster her heart beat and the stiffer her back grew. What if her intended didn't show?

She *couldn't* go back.

As the crowd thinned, her eyes met the dark speculative gaze of a man on the other side of the platform who seemed to be observing her. With a slight nod, he tucked his dusty hat beneath his arm and headed toward her. He was taller than she'd anticipated—and very handsome.

Her heart beat faster. Her cheeks warmed, and she wondered if the man walking toward her with a confident stride was her future husband.

Another train pulled into the station in a cloud of billowing smoke, blasting its arrival, and shattering her nerves.

"Miss Mitchell?" the man asked, his voice respectful, yet unmistakably strong and commanding.

As she took in his soiled clothing and circles of fatigue beneath his eyes, she nodded to let him know he'd found his intended. She hoped he wouldn't notice her aversion to his dirty, unkempt clothing.

He didn't smile. He didn't extend his hand. He waved a filthy piece of paper in front of her face. "I'm Hal Grayson, John Radford's brother. I received your letter to John and regret to inform you that he must cancel your agreement because he…because he recently died in an accident."

Stunned, her gaze jumped between the letter and his unwavering gaze.

"I've purchased your passage back to Buffalo," he said, his eyes wrought with grief and… anger? "I apologize for your trouble. I'll load your bags while you board. The train will be departing again in minutes."

Sawdust covered his clothing, and perspiration wet the underarms of his shirt. He towered above her, thin for his height, and yet despite his frown, she couldn't think of another man more handsome… or indifferent.

A few passengers stepped off the train, greeted their friends and loved ones, then gathered their belongings and rushed off.

"You'd best hurry, Miss Mitchell," he said, nodding toward the open train door.

She glanced around her believing there had been a terrible mistake. "But I don't… John promised to meet me here."

Hal Grayson's lips twisted. "As you can see, my brother is not here. He was laid to rest in Buffalo four days ago. While I was there, I tried to locate you after his funeral to save you the trip. But I was unable to find a Nancy Mitchell in Buffalo. I regret that his death has changed your plans, Miss Mitchell. It's rather inconvenient for both of us."

"Oh, dear… I'm terribly sorry," she said, realizing her words were offensive. "I only meant… I'm sorry."

Her plan was crumbling. Of course, Mr. Grayson had been unable to find Nancy Mitchell in Buffalo, because Nancy Mitchell hadn't existed until she'd answered John Grayson's advertisement. Helplessly, Nancy searched the station for the man she was supposed to meet, the man who had provided a means for her to

escape the disastrous marriage her father had arranged for her. But that man wasn't coming, so she turned to the only hope she had. "I can't go back, Mister Grayson."

"I'm afraid you must," he said without batting those long black lashes of his. With a curt nod toward the train, he added, "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but you'll need to board now, Miss Mitchell."

She shook her head and threw herself on the mercy of the only person who could help her out of this predicament. "Please, Mr. Grayson. I had an agreement with... with your brother. I can't go back because I... I simply must stay."

His dark eyebrows lowered in a scowl. "Your services are no longer required, Miss Mitchell. Now please board the train before it leaves without you. I emptied my purse purchasing your ticket. I can't afford to put you up in a room for the night."

"My *services?*" Her temper flared. "I was to become your brother's *wife,* Mr. Grayson, not a servant who provides a *service.*"

He raised his palm as if to apologize for his offense. "Beg pardon, Miss Mitchell. My brother sought a woman who could prepare our meals and tend our home. Those are the services he advertised for in exchange for marriage, yes?"

"His letter said he was looking for love." Nancy retrieved John's letter from her purse and waved it beneath Hal Grayson's arrogant nose as he'd done so unceremoniously with the letter she'd sent to his brother. Thanks to years of debating her father at every turn, she'd grown adept at outwitting a worthy opponent. "He wanted *love*, Mr. Grayson."

Hal's eyebrows shot upward in surprise and then slashed right back down into a scowl that was already becoming familiar. Although he didn't say it, she could tell he didn't believe her claim.

John Grayson's letter had stated that he hoped they would get on well together and both find their arrangement pleasant. He wanted an amicable relationship. That was close enough to love for Nancy. It was far better than the alternative waiting for her back in Buffalo.

She noted that Hal Grayson's hand was devoid of a wedding band. "Forgive my breach of etiquette, Mr. Grayson, but are you married?" Her boldness made her face burn, but she was desperate.

His eyebrows lifted, no doubt surprised by her bold question. "I haven't made a match as of yet," he said.

"Your brother promised that I would have a good home here and be treated kindly," she said. "I left everything for him, Mr. Grayson. I can't go back. I'm truly sorry about your brother, but in his absence, I must place myself on your mercy and beg your assistance."

"I'm afraid there's nothing more I can do, Miss Mitchell."

"But you can't just leave me stranded here."

"I've purchased your passage back to Buffalo. This train is heading to Buffalo."

"I told you I can't return. It's out of the question, Mr. Grayson. Until we find a suitable solution, I have no choice but to hold you responsible in your brother's stead."

"Me?" He staggered back a step with a derisive laugh. "No, ma'am. I'm not fulfilling my brother's contract. That was an agreement I was against from the start."

"An agreement nonetheless, Mr. Grayson. I have nothing to go back to because of the *promise* your brother made to me. And now I'm stranded in a strange town without any means to support myself. I have no other options. Not one."

"I'm not seeking a wife, Miss Mitchell."

"Well, your brother was, and he made a commitment to me. A man of integrity would honor his deceased brother's debts and agreements."

He drew himself up as if preparing to bodily put her on the train, but it was already chugging out of the station.

Through clenched teeth, he said, "You've missed your train, which was extremely unwise, Miss Mitchell." Releasing a growl deep in his throat, he said, "Wait here," and headed inside the station.

Heart thundering, Nancy stood outside and tried to calm her racing heart. Warm June sunshine splashed across the worn planks of the platform, and yet she stood alone and shivering, wondering if she'd just won a battle or made the biggest mistake of her life.

I hope you enjoyed this preview of Hal and Nancy's story and that you'll want to read the rest of When I Fall in Love

BUT BEFORE YOU GO…

Cali and I would love to share some words about creating Leo and Grace's story that we think you'll enjoy.

Pease TURN THE PAGE
for a special note from Wendy and Cali!

Dear Reader,

I'd like to give a proper introduction to the amazing author who helped make this book *Captured by the Captain* possible. Cali Coleman is a truly gifted writer and genuinely wonderful person. Cali and I have been friends for years. In fact, she read my first partial draft of *Shades of Honor* way back in the late 90s and gave me some excellent advice I still use today while writing my books.

Creating this book with Cali has been a delightful journey. During our many brainstorming sessions, often over lunch or tea on my back porch, we poured our hearts into writing a fabulous story that would honor Leo and Grace and their difficult journey to their happily-ever-after. What a joy it was for me to plan and write this book with Cali. Her brilliant suggestions and gorgeous writing have brought so much to this project. It was a labor of love for both of us, and we hope you enjoyed Leo and Grace's story as much as we enjoyed writing it.

If you haven't read all the books in my Second Chance Brides series (where I first introduce Leo), you can find my complete book list after Cali's note or learn more about them on my website.

I hope you loved spending time in Leo and Grace's world and that you'll consider posting an online review and sharing your enjoyment of this book with your reader friends.

As always, peace and warmest wishes to you and your loved ones,

Wendy

Please TURN THE PAGE for
a note from Cali Coleman!

A NOTE FROM CALI COLEMAN

Dear Fellow Book Lover,

Isn't it fantastic when you can get together with a good friend and *just play*? That's what creating this book with the incomparable Wendy Lindstrom has been like for me.

Wendy is a beautiful person, a dear friend, and an absolute dynamo at writing.

When I (rather persistently) brought up the idea of the two of us collaborating on a project several years ago, I was ecstatic when she said yes. I was even more thrilled when we decided to create Leo Sullivan's story.

I have loved the character of Leo since first meeting him in the pages of *Sleigh of Hope, A Grayson Christmas*. To think that I could be a part of telling his story was unbelievable—and an opportunity I didn't want to fumble.

I write both sweet and sensual historical romance as Lindsay Randall. But writing with Wendy has pushed me to create in a whole new way, which is why I took on the pseudonym of Cali Coleman. If you'd like to see a different side of me, please sign up for **Lindsay's Latest News**.

I hope you love Leo and Grace's story as much as I do and will share your thoughts about it with other book lovers. It moved me to tears at times… and it proved to be my sanity during the shelter-at-home phase of the pandemic. I spent my nights and weekends

aboard *Destiny*, at Indigo Isle, and in Crane Landing with Leo and Grace. What great places to be during those long months. And what an absolute honor to be able to collaborate with my good friend and writing partner, Wendy Lindstrom.

Here's hoping your own adventures are as thrilling and fulfilling as those of Leo and Grace!

Wishing you all good things,

Cali Coleman
aka Lindsay Randall

About Wendy Lindstrom



Wendy Lindstrom is the RITA award-winning and *New York Times* bestselling author of the Grayson Brothers family saga, a captivating series of feel-good, emotionally powerful novels with characters you'd want as friends, neighbors, and lovers. Her books are unforgettable, heartwarming stories about enduring friendships, family bonds, and romantic relationships between strong, complex characters living in a charming small town in America.

Fans of uplifting, binge-worthy historical romance will love Miss Lindstrom’s popular Grayson Brothers series, a #1 storewide bestseller on Barnes and Noble, and a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling series. Romantic Times has dubbed her "one of romance's finest writers," and readers rave about her enthralling characters and the "awesome underlying emotional power" of her work. The Grayson Brothers series is a must-read for those who love stories that uplift and warm the heart.

For more information about the author, her books, and to get the behind-the-scenes scoop at her Rustic Studio—a world much like the Grayson Brothers world—visit her website and also subscribe to her wonderfully

engaging newsletter where she shares personal stories about the amazing wildlife at her Rustic Studio, her insights on writing, her tiny house obsession, landscaping her gorgeous water-garden, her passion for great books, and her love of martial arts and other personal topics.

You can also follow her on BookBub.



Grayson Brothers series

BOOKLIST

SENSUAL HISTORICAL ROMANCE SERIES

** These books include Love Scenes*

*When I Fall in Love**

*Shades of Honor**

*The Longing**

*Lips That Touch Mine**

*Kissing in the Dark**

Sleigh of Hope

*Leave it for the Rain**

The Promise in Your Eyes

*Captured by the Captain**

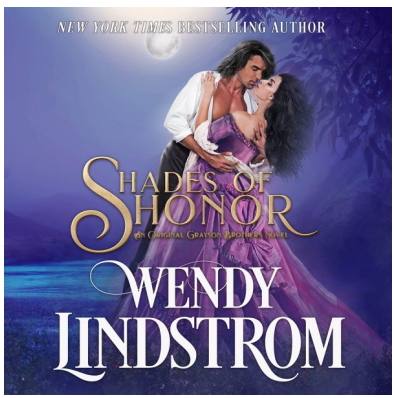
(co-authored with bestselling author Cali Coleman)

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Shades of Honor Audiobook FREE
with 30 day trial!



When I Fall in Love (not in audiobook)
*Shades of Honor**
*The Longing**
*Lips That Touch Mine**
*Kissing in the Dark**
Sleigh of Hope
*Leave it for the Rain**
The Promise in Your Eyes (not in audiobook)
Captured by the Captain (not in audiobook)

About Cali Coleman

(also known as Lindsay Randall)



Cali Coleman is a pseudonym for bestselling romance author Lindsay Randall, who has been lauded for her “lyrical prose” and adventurous stories. RT Book Reviews honored her with a Reviewers Choice Award, and readers have responded to the “solid writing and engaging action” found in the pages of her books.

Cali/Lindsay makes her home in the beautiful Pennsylvania Wilds. She invites readers to sign up for her newsletter, follow her at Book Bub and to connect with her at her web home.

Other books by Cali Coleman
(writing as Lindsay Randall)

To Woo an Heiress
(a series of sweet Regency novels)

Lady Lissa's Liaison
Miss Marcie's Mischief
A Dangerous Courtship
Miss Meredith's Marriage
The Heiress and the Highwayman
Coming soon!
To Woo an Heiress Boxed Set

Stand-alone titles

Rescuing the Handmaiden
(a sweet historical romance)
The award-winning Phantom
(a sensual historical romance with paranormal elements)
Rescued by the Cowboy
(a sweet and adventurous contemporary romance)
Captured by the Captain
(co-authored with bestselling author Wendy Lindstrom for her sensual historical romance Grayson Brothers series)

Wait! Don't Miss Out…

Be sure to subscribe to
Wendy's and Cali's newsletters.



Even with many layers of editing, mistakes can slip through. If you encounter typos or errors in this book, please send them to Wendy Lindstrom at http://www.wendylindstrom.com/contact/.

Thank you for your support!

We are deeply grateful for your online reviews and for you sharing your enjoyment of our book with your reader friends.